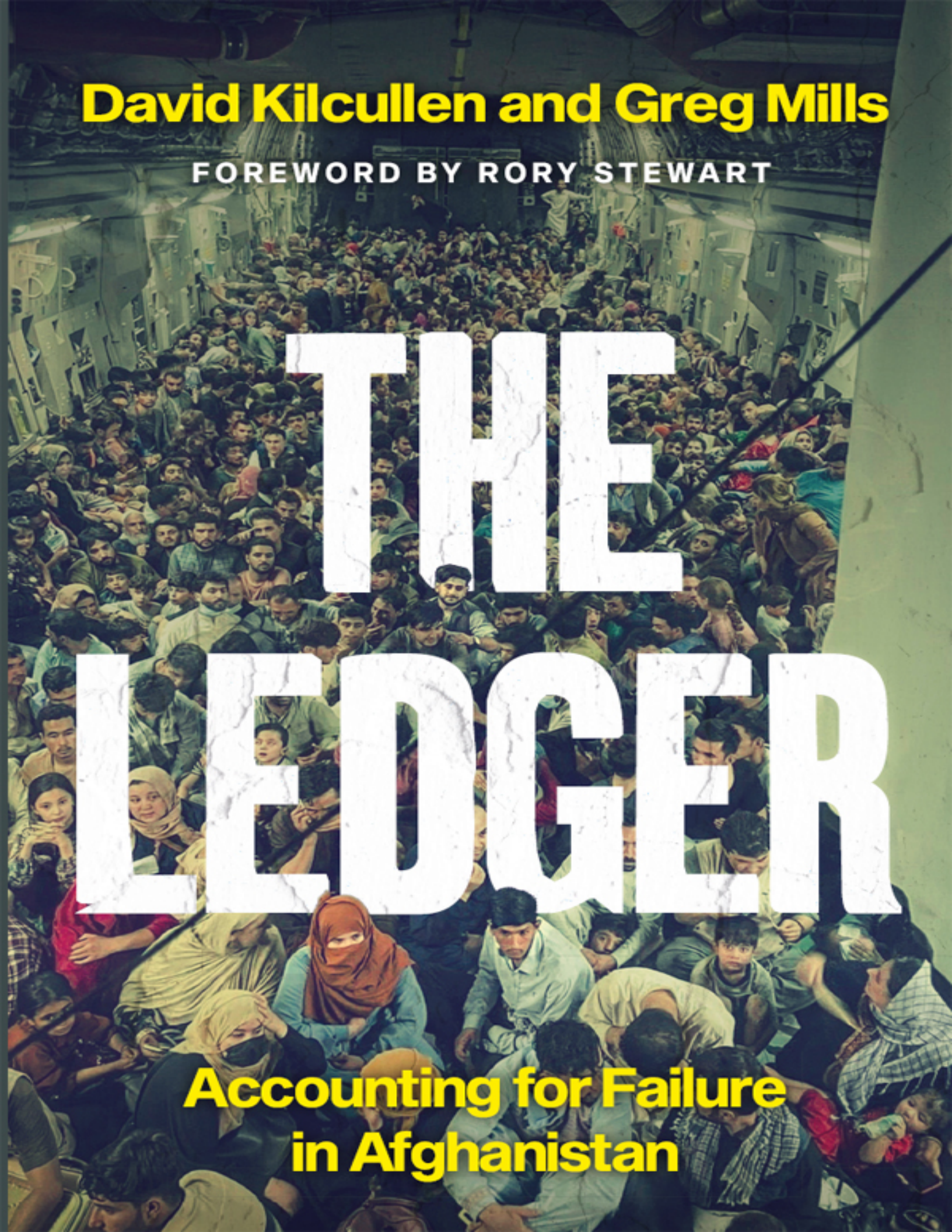
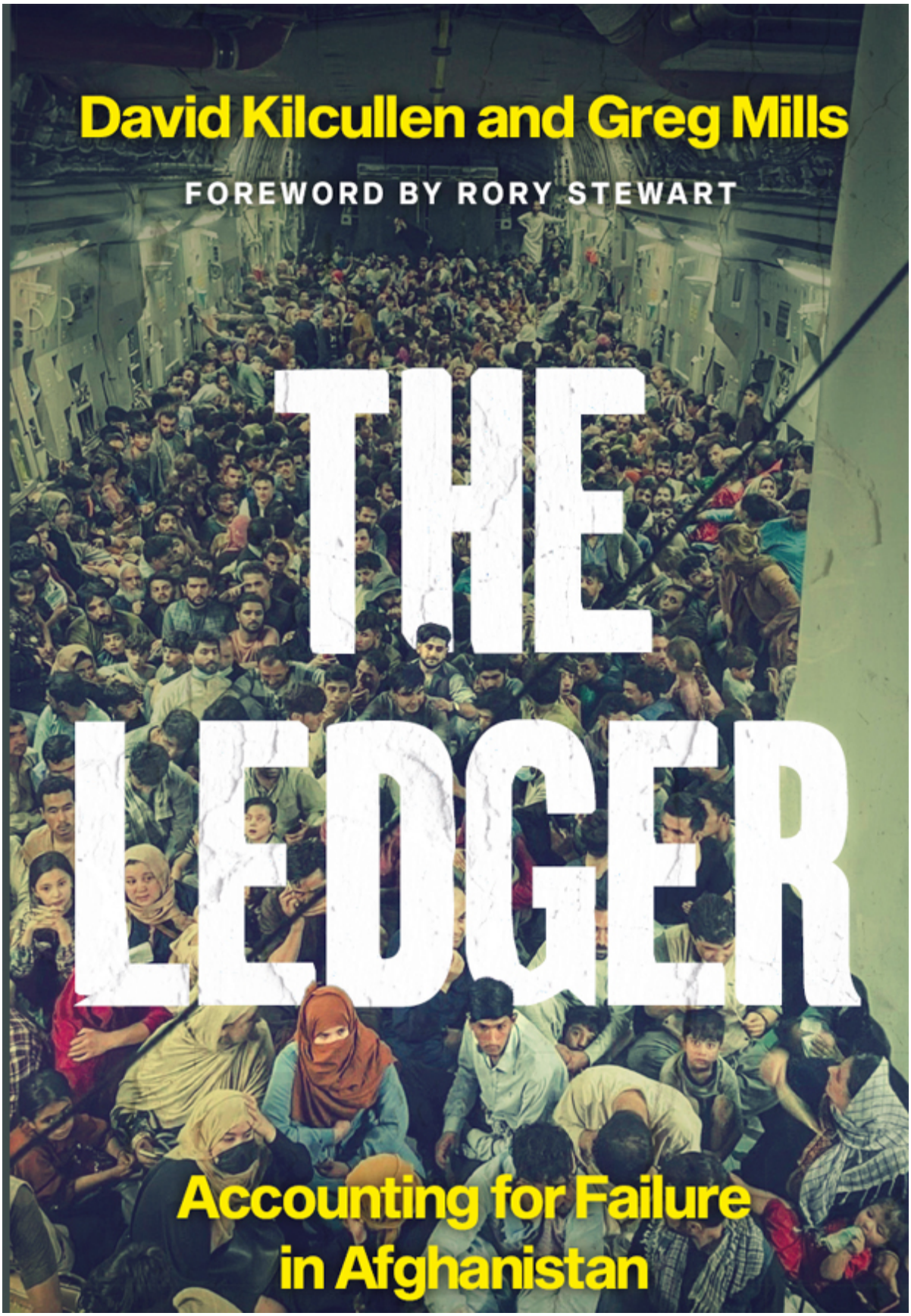
David Kilcullen and Greg Mills

FOREWORD BY RORY STEWART



THE LEDGER

Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan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DAVID KILCULLEN

GREG MILLS

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'Every age has its follies; perhaps the folly of our age could be defined as an unmatched ambition to change the world, without even bothering to study it in detail and understand it first.'

Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*

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FOREWORD

Rory Stewart

In July 2021, with the US troops almost entirely withdrawn and the Taliban beginning their advance on Kabul, Greg Mills was in the presidential palace with President Ashraf Ghani. His presence there—at a time when few other internationals were prepared to even visit the country—is a powerful illustration of the character of this man and the nature of this book, which reflects, on his part—and on the part of the equally remarkable David Kilcullen—their direct and intimate engagement with Afghanistan over sixteen years.

Kilcullen and Mills are pragmatic optimists. They refuse to accept easy solutions, but they also reject easy pessimism. They are unrelenting in their criticisms. But they remain convinced that nothing was preordained, that Afghanistan was never condemned—by its history, or structures or context to failure. And this refusal to patronise, or dismiss Afghans or Afghanistan, reflects both the authors' hard-won arguments, deep experience and reflection, and their direct involvement in a prodigious range of levels of this intervention. Kilcullen and Mills were at the heart of the policy machine, serving as the closest advisors to the most senior generals on the ground (and in Kilcullen's case, as senior counterterrorism advisor to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice). But they also developed friendships with police officers at border posts, with security teams in the capital, and with business people struggling in industrial parks on the edge of Kandahar. Their irrepressible curiosity drove them to ride in Pakistani trucks at six

miles an hour along some of the most dangerous roads in Afghanistan simply to try to understand the way the road taxation system functions, and focus on the electricity supply for cold storage systems.

What makes the book unique, however, is the experience they bring from outside Afghanistan—whether that is David Kilcullen starting as a young Australian infantry captain in a village in west Java or his distinguished service in the Middle East, and Latin America, or Greg Mills's work as an advisor to the heads of state in Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. And they have a fine eye for historical detail (whether it is LBJ saying 'I feel like a jackass caught in a Texas hailstorm. I can't run, I can't hide and I can't make it stop,' or French President Charles de Gaulle warning Kennedy in 1962 that 'I predict you will, step by step, be sucked into a bottomless military and political quagmire').

So this is a book not only about Afghanistan but also about Vietnam, Mali and Somaliland. And this range of lessons gives them a uniquely confident and broad sense of the failures of international development projects, and an argument for what works—what can be done effectively in places like Somaliland if there is genuine local ownership and leadership, even in the most impossibly testing conditions. These arguments reflect experience, scepticism and faith.

Nothing shows their strengths better than their superbly detailed reporting on the last phase of Afghanistan, and the way in which the Taliban took over the country. No one has written as well about how each Taliban campaign over the final five years—including paradoxically their apparent losses—put them in a stronger position. Kilcullen and Mills are able to explain (and in painful detail) how the increasing focus on special forces undermined the capacity of the Afghan national army and removed some of the most capable soldiers; how as the helicopters were grounded, it became impossible to supply ammunition, food or water to Afghan forward operating bases; how those bases—starved, unpaid in the midst of a population that had lost the faith to cooperate—found themselves encircled, and ultimately saw no alternative other than to walk out. And how the fall of each base, encouraged the fall of its neighbour. They illustrate how the final deployments in Kandahar and Lashkar Gah undermined the capacity to fight in Kabul; and how Ashraf Ghani's relationship with the former

Jihadi commanders fundamentally crippled the ability to supplement the army with a militia response.

All of this is told with immense elegance, empathy, respect for Afghans, and deep understanding of the local terrain and context. Kilcullen and Mills explain something that is otherwise very difficult to understand: how a comparatively small Taliban force was able to achieve such a stunning and rapid victory over a large conventional army. And in doing so, they suggest much broader lessons. (They suggest for example the dynamics which might explain how comparatively small attacking forces along the Danube in the late fourth century and early fifth century were able to ultimately undermine and destroy the far larger, and apparently far better resourced, Roman Empire.)

The central question, however, which this book poses again and again, is why highly intelligent and highly experienced people were able to make such catastrophic errors. Mills and Kilcullen observe that 'any visitor to Afghanistan during the war, and anyone (including both of us) who served as a military or civilian adviser in the field during the conflict, could not fail to be struck by the extraordinary commitment and competence of military commanders'. The civilian leadership was also frequently far better informed, far more thoughtful, and intelligent, than critics acknowledge. And yet, as Mills and Kilcullen point out, they got so much wrong. They did not try to reach a political settlement with the Taliban in 2001—and had they done so then at a time of maximum leverage, the current debacle might have been avoided. International strategy and policies lurched in hectic inconsistency between the narrowest objectives of counter-terrorism, to the grandest dreams of national transformation. NATO built a grotesquely unsustainable Afghan military, which patently could not survive without foreign support, despite knowing that they would withdraw their support. US generals insisted on the importance of local ownership, while deploying 130,000 foreign troops, and side-lining Afghan presidents and firing Afghan governors. Above all the international community consistently and repeatedly tried to do things which they could not do. The very mission statements around which the military and civilian strategies for state-building and counter-insurgency were every organised (the idea of 'nation-building under fire') were aspirations to do what was almost certainly impossible. And this should have been obvious even at the time.

To grasp the logic and the tragedy of the Afghan interventions, however, it is important not simply to condemn these decisions but to empathise with them. To realise how every decision felt like a dilemma—how every call seemed to leave the policy maker damned if they did and damned if they didn't. How the better choices seemed so damaging and risky at the time. Failure in Afghanistan was not simply a question of lack of knowledge, curiosity, imagination, or logic. And certainly not a product of mediocre people. The problem is not so much who we sent to Afghanistan, but the way we act everywhere at home and abroad—the way Western civil servants, generals and politicians approach all problems and policy, foreign or domestic.

The flaws that Mills and Kilcullen so assiduously identify—impatience, inconsistency, lack of realism, an ability to accept partial failure to select lesser evils—are deeply embedded in our institutions, our society and our culture. They are in a sense 'us.' They echo how politicians present themselves to voters, and generals present themselves to politicians. They reflect how we—in the West—conceive of power, knowledge and legitimacy. They are products of a world-view that finds it impossible to imagine that there could be any problem that we cannot fix, or any situation —even one as complex as Afghanistan—which could not be integrated into a single coherent and successful strategy.

And this is why the most interesting conclusions of this book relate to how the West might, in the future, understand itself better—understand its delusions, weaknesses, and temptations—and frame interventions that give less scope for its inherent flaws. How, as Mills and Kilcullen ask, could the West learn to act with self-knowledge and humility?

Greg Mills and David Kilcullen—with their academic learning, thirty years or more of experience in the field, questioning minds, an ability to challenge assumptions and get out on the ground, willingness to tackle difficult and uncomfortable truths—tell a powerful, unified story. The question of what might have been done in Afghanistan will continue to be debated for centuries. The broader question of whether it is possible for the international community to state-build in the context of counterinsurgency is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. But in their energy, optimism and determination to follow through models and approaches across continents, and connect history, economics, private sector development, and state-building, Kilcullen and Mills embody the energy and idealism which will be

necessary if we are ever to make sense of this most difficult of problems. I feel very lucky to know them both, and to be able to introduce this book.

Rory Stewart
Yale University, New Haven, CT,
October 2021

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ledger had its immediate origins in the chaos of the evacuation from Kabul in August 2021. While working together to secure the safety of a number of vulnerable Afghans, we decided that it would be useful to try to make sense of the failure of the international mission.

The book, however, has deeper roots. Twenty years have passed now since 9/11. In that time, we have both worked in an advisory capacity in Afghanistan to commanders of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), in the field with combat units and other agencies, training advisers and other specialists, and later with senior civilian officials in the Arg, Afghanistan's presidential palace, once ISAF had transitioned to Resolute Support in 2015.

In believing that we can learn a great deal from observing and listening to others, we were fortunate to have visited most of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces. One or both of us spent some portion of every year in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2015, then again in 2019 and 2021. Between us, we worked with multiple coalition troop-contributing nations, aid agencies, diplomatic and intelligence services, and scientific research organisations in the field. We also worked with Afghan civilian government officials, police and military forces, and spoke—more often than might be expected—with representatives or sympathisers of the Taliban. Between us, we had the opportunity to take a long hard look at the war.

There were many astonishing aspects about the suddeness of the collapse of the international mission. One striking takeaway from the fall of Kabul is that a group with a narrow-minded ideology and tribal support base was able to take control of a country with such geographic, tribal and

sectarian diversity. The reasons for that failure, its likely impacts, and the prospects for peace are the central concerns of this volume.

When we research and write, there is always someone behind us, supporting our efforts, encouraging those moments of inevitable self-doubt. Our publishers, led by the indefatigble Michael Dwyer, urged us to this book's rapid conclusion, while our families selflessly allowed us the time to do so. The Brenthurst Foundation provided logistical and generous financial support, both during assignments in Afghanistan and in the book's final writing phase.

We are especially grateful to Rory Stewart for offering his thoughtful foreword, to Aziz Amin Ahmadzai for his insider's insights, as well as to the many other Afghans who showed us remarkable hospitality over the last fifteen years of our involvement.

The village of Imlil in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains proved to be the perfect place to put the finishing touches to the book, and to decompress from weeks of frantic work to evacuate Afghan friends and colleagues, in October 2021. The staff of the Riad Jnane Imlil led by Mustafa, Hassan and Mohammed were gracious and attentive hosts. Ray Hartley, Tom Carter, Marie-Noelle Nwokolo and Dianna Games kindly assisted in casting a keen editorial eye over the manuscript.

There are many frustrations, for both of us, about what went wrong in Afghanistan—including the part we ourselves played in the disaster. The serial episodic loss of attention, the failure ever to grant the country the attention it deserved, the distraction of Iraq, the consistent underestimation of the Taliban as a military force over twenty years, and the unwillingness to dedicate diplomatic and military resources that could have consolidated the gains of a generation are all obvious failings. The loss of blood and treasure, of good friends and of illusions about the countries we served, stings. The toughest admission of all, however, is to acknowledge the way Afghans were let down by others, including us. While Afghans themselves bear, inevitably, a share of the blame, the hopes and expectations of many have been dashed by this debacle, seemingly returning them back to square one.

The challenge of rebuilding and stabilising Afghanistan, now, is moot. The key question is rather whether the Taliban's leaders, their regional allies and their international partners can learn from the mistakes of the past. Failure to do so will not only condemn Afghanistan to a social order that is

small-minded and brutal, but to a cycle of future conflict that could become an inspiration or a harbour for international terrorism.

But the impact of this failure does not end in Central Asia or the Middle East. There are implications for how we think about countering violent extremism and peacebuilding elsewhere, especially in Africa. And there are implications for those who seek to lead internationally.

In 2002, returning from Afghanistan, then Senator Joe Biden warned that history would judge America harshly if it 'failed to stay the course'. The US and its allies will have to act differently now if they are to regain their credibility and moral authority.

DJK & GJBM,
Imlil, Morocco
October 2021

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Kilcullen is Professor of International and Political Studies at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Canberra, Professor of Practice at Arizona State University (ASU), and CEO of the geopolitical risk analysis firm Cordillera Applications Group. He previously founded and led the global consulting firm Caerus Associates, and the technology firm First Mile Geo (now Native).

He is a theorist and practitioner of guerrilla and unconventional warfare, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, with operational experience over a twenty-five-year career with the Australian and American governments as a light infantry officer, intelligence officer, policy adviser and diplomat. He served in Iraq as senior counter-insurgency advisor to General David Petraeus, then as a senior counter-terrorism adviser to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and has served in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya and Colombia.

He is the author of five books and numerous scholarly papers on terrorism, insurgency, urbanisation and future warfare, and was awarded the 2015 Walkley Award for long-form journalism for his war reporting on the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. He heads the Future Operations Research Group at UNSW Canberra, and teaches Masters-level courses on contemporary strategy, special operations, urban warfare and military innovation at UNSW and ASU.

He has led several concept-design teams for US and allied governments and works with national and city-level governments and commercial firms in the US, Australia, Africa, Latin America and Europe on risk prediction, urban development, public safety, resilience and counterterrorism. He worked for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in Afghanistan, where he also co-founded the ISAF Counter-insurgency Advisory and Assistance Team (CAAT). He continues to collaborate with advanced research agencies in the United States, Canada, the UK and elsewhere, focused on technology, artificial intelligence and future conflict.

He provides training for US, Australian and British special operations forces on unconventional warfare and support to resistance movements, and geopolitical risk and futures analysis for several of the largest financial institutions and funds in Australia, North America, the United Kingdom and Europe.

Professor Kilcullen holds a PhD in Politics from UNSW, a Masters degree in Management from the University of Canberra, a Graduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics from the ADF School of Languages and a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from UNSW. He is a special adviser to the Brenthurst Foundation in Johannesburg, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in London, and serves on the boards of several technology start-ups.

www.cordillera-apps.com

Greg Mills heads the Johannesburg-based Brenthurst Foundation, established in 2005 by the Oppenheimer family to strengthen African economic performance. He holds degrees from the universities of Cape Town (BA Hons) and Lancaster (MA *cum laude*, and PhD), and was, first, the Director of Studies and then the National Director of the SA Institute of International Affairs from 1994–2005.

At Brenthurst, he has directed numerous reform projects with African heads of government, including Rwanda (2007–8), Mozambique (2005–11), Eswatini—formerly Swaziland—(2010–11), Malawi (2012–14, and again 2020–1), Kenya (2012 and 2020), Lesotho (2008 and 2019–20), Liberia

(2006–7), Zambia (2010 and 2016), Zimbabwe (2009–13), Ghana (2017), Ethiopia (2019–20), Nigeria (2017–18), and almost continuously at various levels of government in South Africa since the Foundation was established.

He is on the visiting faculty at the NATO Higher Defence College and the Royal College of Defence Studies. He also sat on the Danish Africa Commission and on the African Development Bank's high-level panel on fragile states. He has served four deployments to Afghanistan with ISAF as an adviser to the commander. He has also worked extensively in Colombia, and with a variety of African governments in improving the conditions for peacebuilding and investment, including through the Zambezi Protocol on the natural resource sector.

A member of the advisory board of the Royal United Services Institute, he is the author of the best-selling books *Why Africa Is Poor* and *Africa's Third Liberation*, and together with former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, *Making Africa Work: A Handbook for Economic Success*. In 2018 he completed a second stint as a visiting fellow at Cambridge University, producing a book on the state of African democracy, which was published as *Democracy Works* in 2019. *The Asian Aspiration: Why and How Africa Should Emulate Asia* (again with President Obasanjo and former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn).

His writings won him the Recht Malan Prize for Non-Fiction Work in South Africa. His latest book is *Expensive Poverty*, which details the failings of aid, and suggests several ways to improve development outcomes.

www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org

Rory Stewart was UK Secretary of State for International Development, Minister of State for Justice, Minister of State in the Foreign Office and the Department of International Development (covering Africa, Middle East, and Asia), Minister for the Environment and Chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee.

He has been a public servant for twenty-nine years. After a brief period as an infantry officer, he joined the UK Diplomatic Service, serving overseas in Jakarta, as British representative to Montenegro in the wake of the Kosovo crisis, and as the coalition Deputy-Governor of two provinces of Southern Iraq following the intervention of 2003. On leave from the Foreign Service, he walked for twenty-one months crossing Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal, staying in 500 village houses on the journey.

In 2005, he established the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Kabul, working to restore a section of the old city, establish a clinic, primary school, and Arts Institute, and bring Afghan crafts to international markets.

In 2008, he became the Ryan Professor of Human Rights at the Harvard Kennedy School and Director for the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy.

His books include the international bestsellers *The Places in Between, The Prince of the Marshes and The Marches*.

He is currently a Senior Fellow at The Jackson Institute and a Distinguished Fellow in Grand Strategy at Yale University.

‘*The Ledger* explains the reasons for yesterday’s failure in Afghanistan. It also clarifies the imperative for tomorrow’s international engagement.’

Commander Ahmad Massoud,
Chairman of the Afghan National Resistance Movement

‘What went wrong and what went right in Afghanistan? This brilliant analysis by two people who were there has many of the answers.’

General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff,
United Kingdom

‘In accounting for success and failure in Afghanistan, *The Ledger* provides crystal-clear “do’s and don’ts” for future similar missions.’

General Richard B. Myers, former Chairman of the
US Joint Chiefs of Staff; President, Kansas State University

‘Clear-minded, closely involved for many years in the West’s Afghan project, the authors of this passionate and important book are determined that we do not repeat elsewhere the shameful way it ended.’

Sir Rodric Braithwaite, author of *Afgantsy*

‘Based on the authors’ extensive first-hand experience in Afghanistan and peace missions elsewhere, *The Ledger* goes to the heart of why the Afghan mission failed and what we must do to avoid future, similar disasters. Read it, and learn.’

Karin von Hippel, Director-General,
Royal United Services Institute

‘Based on years of courageous fieldwork, *The Ledger’*s careful analysis is a timely reminder of what happens when internal and external state-building efforts are misaligned.’

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nobel Peace Laureate,
former President of Liberia

‘This explanation of the failure of the international mission and fall of Kabul contains salient lessons for us all, now and in the future.’

General Mohammad Yasin Zia,
former Chief of the General Staff, Afghanistan

‘*The Ledger* makes vividly clear the “do’s and don’ts” of foreign intervention—key lessons applicable beyond Afghanistan.’

General Sergio Mantilla, former Chief of the
Colombian Army

‘Few have enjoyed the access and experience of Greg Mills and David Kilcullen in Afghanistan this century. This is evident in the richness of their critique of Western attempts to, first, stabilise the country and, later, rebuild it. In bringing to life the dilemmas and bitter lessons of the policy maker, diplomat and military professional alike, *The Ledger* lays out a workable strategy for building peace.’

Swaran Singh, Professor for Diplomacy and Disarmament,
Centre for International Politics, Organisation and
Disarmament, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

‘The authors had their boots on the ground and it shows in this searing account of what went wrong in Afghanistan.’

Ambassador Juan-Carlos Pinzon,
former Minister of Defence, Colombia

‘An analytical *tour de force*.’

Ambassador Barry Desker, Distinguished Fellow,
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

THE NEW SYMPATHISERS

As the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021, the authors of this book—an Australian and a South African—who had spent decades trying to make the international intervention in Afghanistan a success—found themselves with a new mission. They were now working day and night to get those they had worked with out of the country before they fell victim to the Taliban's revenge. How had this come to be? How had so much money, power and military might ended in panic, despair and failure?

With hindsight, the answers were to be found in plain sight.

Donald H. Rumsfeld dictated hundreds of instructions and comments in memos, dubbed 'snowflakes', between 2001 and 2006.

'I may be impatient. In fact, I know I'm a bit impatient,' stated the former US Defense Secretary in one such memo. 'We are never going to get the US military out of Afghanistan unless we take care to see that there is something going on that will provide the stability that will be necessary for us to leave. Help!' he wrote.[1] The memo was dated 17 April 2002—six months into a war that eventually lasted two decades.[2]

We have been here before. President Lyndon Baines Johnson described his options in South Vietnam in a similar vein in 1965, at the start of a massive increase in the US's commitment. 'I feel like a jackass caught in a Texas hailstorm. I can't run, I can't hide, and I can't make it stop.'[3]

These are not new dilemmas. The French collapse at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was not surprising; it was true to form. Even though the head of the French delegation had told a representative of the Viet Minh early in the

war, ‘We only need an ordinary police operation for eight days to get all of you out,’[4] by 1952 the Viet Minh controlled an estimated one-quarter of the South’s population, three-quarters of the population in the central region, and half in the North. Its ‘liberated zones’ were steadily and seemingly unstoppably expanding, while French casualties continued to mount. By 1954, the Eisenhower administration was footing no less than 80% of the cost of the war, amounting to some $1 billion* annually.[5]

America’s involvement in Vietnam illustrated two clear limits to the role of outsiders. While the US could do everything in its power to assist the South Vietnamese, it could not win the conflict for them. This was a function of determination and legitimacy, both of which Saigon lacked by comparison to the North and its allies. Likewise, the American intervention in Vietnam was a case study in hubris but, ultimately, also in humility. It teaches many lessons, not least of which is the importance of seeing the military aspect as but one component of any struggle, and not necessarily the most important one.

By January 1961, when John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the 35th president of the US, the situation in Vietnam was spiralling towards chaos, with about 20,000 Viet Minh operating in the South, building political support and military capacity. In September 1961 alone there were 450 attacks, some involving hundreds of guerrillas.

The goal of the guerrillas, christened the ‘Viet Cong’ by President Ngo Dinh Diem, was to follow the same combined diplomatic, military and political strategy that had defeated the French. As they tightened their grip on the countryside, the South Vietnamese army grew increasingly defensive, despite the presence of about 900 American advisers by 1961. By the end of that year, with 1,000 deaths from guerrilla action every week, Saigon clearly faced an all-out war. Despite a reluctance to be drawn into an Asian war, and fearing the impact of Chinese and Soviet support, in November 1961 Kennedy agreed to an increase in funding and advisory support for the South, upping the number of advisers to 3,000 including 300 helicopter pilots. It proved to be the thin end of the wedge.

It was not as if Washington was not warned about, or did not realise, the risk it was running. French President Charles de Gaulle told his US counterpart in 1962, ‘I predict you will, step by step, be sucked into a bottomless military and political quagmire.’ It was a war that Washington was drawn into through fear of the impact of a Communist victory on the

rest of Southeast Asia and, less directly, the perception of America's power and standing in the Cold War.

'Now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place,' said Kennedy in a June 1961 interview with the *New York Times*. 'We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam,' Kennedy confided to a friend in April 1963, however. 'Those people hate us. They are going to throw our asses out of there at any point. But I can't give up that territory to the Communists and get the American people to re-elect me.'[6]

Some 2.7 million Americans eventually served in the official era of the Vietnam conflict from 1964 to 1975, representing nearly 10% of their generation. The in-country US military total peaked at 543,482 in April 1968. Combat and other American deaths totalled 58,220 across Indochina, a figure that pales against the more than three million Vietnamese who died during its liberation wars, including an estimated 250,000 South and 1.1 million North Vietnamese soldiers.[7] The American experience in Vietnam reminds us of the importance of establishing a political and social order. Failure to do so will result in, well, just that: failure.

As Robert Kennedy put it, 'A military answer is the failure of counter-insurgency… any effort that disregards the basis of social reform, and becomes preoccupied with gadgets and techniques and forces, is doomed to failure and should not be supported.'[8]

In a remarkable comment in the wake of his 1961 trip to Vietnam, Lyndon B. Johnson stressed the importance 'of responsible political institutions… there must be simultaneous, vigorous and integrated attacks on the economic, social and other ills of the Vietnamese people. The leadership and initiative of this attack must rest with the Vietnamese leaders.' He then went on to entirely disregard and circumvent his own advice, with catastrophic circumstances for his presidency and, indeed, for the US and South Vietnam.

Instead, the mission became, in the words of General William Westmoreland, commander of United States forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, 'like trying to push spaghetti', much of it in the style of colonial governments through the ages, where force might suffice to inflict tactical defeats on the insurgent but contributed astonishingly little, with no absent meaningful political, cultural and social content.

It is April 1975, and Saigon is in chaos. At his villa, a general of the South Vietnamese army is drinking whiskey and, with the help of his trusted captain, drawing up a list of those who will be given passage aboard the last flights out of the country. The general and his compatriots start a new life in Los Angeles, unaware that one among their number, the captain, is secretly observing and reporting on the group to a higher-up in the Viet Cong. *The Sympathizer*, a novel by Viet Thanh Nguyen, is the story of this captain: a man brought up by an absent French father and a poor Vietnamese mother, a man who went to university in America, but returned to Vietnam to fight for the Communist cause. A gripping spy novel, an astute exploration of extreme politics, and a moving love story, *The Sympathizer* explores a life between two worlds and examines the legacy of the Vietnam War in literature, film, and the wars we fight today. The last American soldier left Vietnam in a helicopter from the rooftop of the US embassy in Saigon in April 1975. By the time of the evacuation, known as Operation Frequent Wind, US military supplies to the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN), who were trained and equipped to fight a war devised by America, had dried up, blocked by a Democrat controlled Congress despite President Richard Nixon's promises to the contrary. This left America's ally virtually helpless in the face of Hanoi's motivated and well-equipped forces.

The war did not end, however, with the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese on 30 April 1975. At least 300,000 South Vietnamese 'counter-revolutionaries' were sent to re-education camps from which many would not return, while millions were resettled, among them 800,000 boat people.

The Sympathizer, recounts the flight of a young army captain, aide to a South Vietnamese general, who leaves Saigon on one of the last evacuation flights. The two conspire to draw up a list of those who will be given passage out of the country. As the facilitator of the journey, the captain manages the bribes for the permits and permissions, highlighting the system of corruption that had led to the collapse in the first instance.

'The rumble was that the price of visas, passports, and seats on evacuation airplanes ran to many thousands of dollars,' he writes, 'depending on the package one chose and the level of one's hysteria.'[9] *The Sympathizer* explores the contrast between their old life in Vietnam, in which the captain remains involved as a communist agent, and the new life

in Los Angeles of the expatriates, continuously yet hopelessly plotting their return to power.

It took little over a decade for the situation in a unified Vietnam to normalise, by which time an economic reform programme, or *Đổi Mới*, had been implemented in the face of economic collapse. After a twenty-year hiatus, the United States re-established diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995. Today, the two countries are close partners in business and, remarkably, military co-operation. In the wake of the collapse of the American-sponsored regime in Kabul in August 2021, Washington must, at best, be hoping that Vietnam offers an analogue to its future with Afghanistan.

Why begin a book on Afghanistan by talking about Vietnam? Because in Afghanistan, history—including all the institutional and operational pathologies of American-led international intervention that had been on full display in Vietnam—repeated itself to a remarkable degree. Between 2001 and 2019, two million men and women were deployed from abroad to serve in Afghanistan, and more than $2 trillion was spent—an extraordinary, once-in-a-generation expenditure of resources on such a poor country. The effort in Afghanistan represented a staggering opportunity cost.

To facilitate an American military withdrawal, Washington made peace with its enemy, the Taliban, while side-lining its ally in the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) in the February 2020 Doha Agreement. The withdrawal of American troops, and of technical advisers including 16,000 critical maintenance personnel, left the Afghan National Army (ANA) with 210 inherited bases that it could not support and dozens of helicopters it could neither maintain nor operate.

The collapse of the ANA and other government forces in the face of the Taliban's advance, and the flight of President Ashraf Ghani and his key advisers from Kabul, left hundreds of thousands of Afghans stranded, battling to find a way to safety, with Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) the epicentre of this trauma, chaos and tragedy.

Like many other veterans, the two of us were contacted immediately by Afghan friends and colleagues desperate to get out. One of those left behind was President Ghani's private secretary, Aziz Amin Ahmadzai. We heard from him on Sunday 15 August 2021, the same day he had been left, literally, holding the bag as Ghani flew out of the Arg government complex,

abandoning Aziz on the helicopter pad and leaving Kabul for Uzbekistan in a scene akin to Saigon or Phnom Penh in 1975.

What unfolded over the next week was a traumatic and, ultimately, successful effort to evacuate Aziz and his family. The complexity of the planning and intrigue involved in his eventual rescue was fitting for a scene in *The Sympathizer*. It was reliant on his resourcefulness, the heroism of troops and civilians on the airfield, and considerable international effort.

Realising that Aziz was a high-profile target and that his life was clearly at risk, not only did we have to find a way to get him on a list of approved evacuees, but also convey him to the airport, sneak him through several checkpoints where Taliban sentries who knew his face were on the lookout for him, and finally get him inside the 'wire'. This was easier to imagine than to do.

To illustrate how quickly Aziz's world came crashing down and how unexpected was the pace of collapse, early on that Sunday he seemed quite confident. At 07:57 (SAST), he wrote in response to the question 'Are you going to hold Kabul?' that 'I think talks are undergoing. Maybe the transfer of power will take place. Peaceful transition of power.' When we followed up by asking whether this would be a Taliban or an interim government, he replied: 'Interim gov'.*

By 16:11 on the same day, the world had turned. When asked 'Are you safe?', Aziz texted: 'Hiding. President left me:) But am not worried.' When asked, 'Has he left Kabul? Do you have a way out?' he responded: 'Yes. He left Kabul. I have political passport and trying', then tellingly, 'I don't know what to do?' Still then, he held out some hope of leaving (it was 16:30 by now). 'I have dreams to play role in the future of this country. I am not scared either. The UK or US can help me as I fulfil the criteria. I am worried for my kids,' he said.

Working together, the two of us immediately activated our networks in the British, Australian and US militaries, other government agencies, NGOs and individuals, including members of the UK parliament, where Tom Tugendhat—an Afghanistan veteran, old friend to both of us, and current Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee—was especially helpful. Initially we were advised to try to get Aziz and his family to the airport and to make contact with coalition forces there. However, the difficulty of accessing the airport was already becoming apparent, with desperate scenes, including people clinging to and falling from giant cargo planes, on our

television screens, and our phones exploding with frantic encrypted text messages from people desperate to get out.

By 17:00 on that Sunday, we had Aziz's passport details. He was reluctant to move in the circumstances. 'Thank you very much. It is very late night and I am afraid we might have security issues. Can I go tomorrow? And if I go, should I go alone or with family? Or I can bring back my family sometime later when I settle. What do you advise?' He was clearly increasingly stressed, but still remarkably calm. At 05:23 the next day, Monday 16 August, Aziz wrote, 'Just to keep you posted, airport is very crowded. And if there is someone inside, he can help otherwise no one can go inside.' He remained in hiding a few miles away from the airport.

Other hurdles were becoming increasingly apparent. Aziz's diplomatic passport allowed him to travel without a visa to Turkey, India, Indonesia, Malaysia or Central Asia. However, he had no permanent residence anywhere, and no nationality other than Afghan—something that set him apart from most other senior officials, who often had a second passport stashed away somewhere, just in case.

Throughout the rest of the day, we attempted to secure travel permission for Aziz via our contacts. But events were moving quickly on the ground. At 22:45 he wrote: 'The Taliban have found about me and they are chasing me. The media has reported that the President has taken millions of cash. So now some of my former trips' footage and videos have gone viral across the world and in the country that I was holding President Ghani's bags full of cash. Further, they say I used to carry state's top secrets in those bags. They wanted to detain me, but influential tribal elders intervened. They say give us money or hand him over to us. They [are] chasing my nephews who are guarding me. Today was very horrible. Now I am in a very different place, underground but a few elders have taken my responsibility and assured Taliban that I won't escape.'

In something between a traditional tribal bond and a mafia shakedown, the elders had extracted a promise that Aziz must stay in Afghanistan or pay a sum of money to escape. His wife and children remained at home, but like many other members of the former government he was now, in effect, evading capture in his own city, frequently having to change location as the Taliban remained on his trail. 'I changed location and they found this one too. Some relatives passes on the information so now am completely hiding in another place with my nephews who are protecting me.' At 17:13 on

Tuesday 17 August he wrote, ‘Yes. I am safe. But now the Taliban knows about my family. What should I do about them?’

By Thursday we had devised a plan. With support from a senior British officer at the airport, we would link him with a US unit at a pre-determined spot near the southern perimeter of the airport where his group would wait in a nondescript car. Aziz had managed to wangle a letter of safe passage from the Taliban governor, based on his tribal contacts and (it later emerged) a substantial sum of cash, to get him and his family (now including two nephews and a brother) through the multiplying Taliban checkpoints. Thursday and Friday crawled by until we were ready to go, in regular three-way WhatsApp contact between Cape Town-Colorado-Kabul, with a junior US officer on the British headquarters staff leading the effort, and Aziz providing real-time live updates.

At 12:09 on Friday, Aziz wrote: ‘Okay she’s saying we will have to drive to the airport’.

‘Can you do that? Are you on your way?’

At 14:36 he replied: ‘Yes I reached MoI [Ministry of Interior]’.

Two minutes later: ‘I am almost here but don’t know’.

‘You have the right spot to go?’

‘I don’t have the exact location’

Amid the stress of getting his group, including four children between the ages of one and seven, on the road, Aziz had failed to inform us of the exact time of his departure. As a result, despite our best efforts in trying to coax the US team closer to where he was waiting, Aziz’s group remained stuck on the road for over an hour, less than 50 feet from a Taliban checkpoint.

At 15:09 the US officer wrote: ‘Fifteen minutes out—had to find a new vehicle.’ The reply from Aziz: ‘Okay. I am waiting on the side of road.’ We replied: ‘[US team] has your location and a photo of your cars—sit tight and stay alert.’

15:21: ‘[US team] is 5 mins out—get ready. Stay in the car.’

Aziz: ‘Great. We are ready.’

Then at 15:43: ‘David and Dr Greg: We haven’t connected. Waiting for [US team].’

At 15:58 a message came from the US team leader: ‘Waive off we cannot get you—we will get you a different way.’ In reply to our message

‘Ok do you want them to stay there or return home?’ the team leader texted: ‘Return home. Not safe at this gate right now.’

After evading the Taliban for five days, doing multiple deals, braving roving Taliban patrols, navigating around a series of checkpoints (his face hidden, lest he be arrested) Aziz had waited, in the open, parked on a street next to the Taliban checkpoint, for hours. Now the US team were unable to make the last ten yards to meet him because the rules imposed on them from Washington did not allow them to interact with the Taliban or leave the airport perimeter wire.

The US team leader, a capable young captain, had been forced to call off the plan given that her team would risk encountering the Taliban in leaving the airfield. The three-way communications were almost too much to bear, knowing that things could go very wrong very quickly. We tracked Aziz’s position and kept him talking through his anxiety but could do little else.

Night was falling and it was not safe to stay on the street, as Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K, the local Islamic State faction) was operating under cover of darkness and had mounted several attacks already. With no alternative, Aziz headed off to a different safe house for the night. We would have to try again on the Saturday. At 18:57, in reply to a note of encouragement, Aziz wrote: ‘Thank you. I very much appreciate your efforts. Well, this is how it is. It’s total chaos down here. Beautiful Kabul turned so ugly.’

His group travelled back to yet another, different, safe house, then tried again on Saturday afternoon. This time everyone was ready. A platoon from the US 10th Mountain Division, mobilised through the determined efforts of a single highly-capable officer inside the wire, was on alert for his arrival. By 13:39 Aziz texted to say that he was on the move. By 18:00 he was ‘inside airport vicinity but the crowd is too much’.

By this point, the original Taliban checkpoints—manned by ordinary Taliban combat units composed of country kids from Kandahar and Paktia who had captured the city the previous week—had begun to be replaced with hard-eyed, well-equipped men from the Haqqani network, a highly ideological Pakistani-sponsored group that was taking over internal security for Kabul.

When Aziz’s group, now numbering several more family members, finally made it through multiple checkpoints into the airport’s southern

parking lot, the American soldiers managed to establish contact, ‘thin out the crowd’ and get them over the wall into the airport. By 20:12 they were through, in trucks, on their way to the passenger terminal for processing. That evening, after more than 1,000 WhatsApp messages, innumerable emails and calls and countless favours, Aziz’s family left for Bahrain and safety. By the following Monday, 23 August and eight days after Ghani had left him standing on the helicopter pad, he had landed in Washington, DC with his family en route to a refugee camp in Wisconsin.

He paid a high price. The Taliban, through tribal intermediaries, had demanded $110,000, the deed to his house, and his car, before they would let Aziz leave Afghanistan. Without access to savings or to friends and contacts overseas, what chance was there for others to run the gauntlet to safety?

By the time Aziz landed in the US, things had dramatically deteriorated outside the airport. The Haqqanis were in control of the outer cordon, a series of Taliban leaders were playing power games with a US contingent on the airfield that was hamstrung by ridiculously passive rules of engagement. Allies such as the Australians, British and French (all of whom were operating outside the wire to rescue people) were deeply frustrated with the Americans—at one point a senior US commander had to implore the Australians and Brits to stop operating outside the wire to rescue their people, as it was making the airport-bound US forces look bad. The chaos around the airport perimeter had become a massive humanitarian catastrophe in its own right. A few days later, a suicide bomber would kill 13 Americans and almost 200 Afghans in the chaotic crowd.

* * *

Aziz’s story is just one among many thousands that could be told by Afghans whose worlds had turned upside down in an instant, forcing them to run incredible risks to save themselves and their families amid one of the most egregiously incompetent self-inflicted debacles in modern military history. And they were the lucky ones—many more families did not make it and, as we write, thousands, including many hundreds of American citizens and green card holders, remain trapped—effectively hostages of the Taliban. Likewise, as Afghanistan veterans, we were not alone in working the phones 24/7 and mobilising our network during those sixteen hectic

days between the fall of Kabul and the last coalition flight out on 31 August 2021.

Thousands of our colleagues, from every coalition nation, many of whom had served in Afghanistan with the military or with civilian agencies, laboured tirelessly to exfiltrate their Afghan colleagues and friends at risk. Many of these efforts appear to have failed, but at least they cared enough to try, unlike their governments. Our network eventually extracted 1,733 people before the deadline, a tiny number compared to the masses of families left behind.

The stories reaching us were tragic, harrowing and often downright pitiful. One that sticks in both our minds was that of twins, separated from their father and older sister. They were trapped at the airport in the massive crowd, desperately trying to avoid being trampled while avoiding the whippings, administered with lengths of steel chain, being handed out by the Haqqanis and other Taliban to anyone who looked like a friend of the foreigners.

With the help of friends in the UK Parliament, we managed to get permission for the twins to enter Britain. But getting people out was only partly a matter of visas and international permissions. Indeed, in the end that was less important than simply having the ability to get them to and through the airport complex, particularly after the bombing of 26 August.

The shortage was not airlift capacity either: there were plenty of aircraft, though friends of ours based in Singapore and Dubai were working around the clock to secure those too. Rather, the bottleneck was one of bandwidth at the airport itself, which is why the attempts of several well-meaning celebrities (British and American) to evacuate Afghan cats and dogs were hopelessly off the mark. It was not just that these animals took up space on aircraft that could have gone to humans, but also that they sucked up planning and processing capacity. They also sent the Afghans, and the rest of the world, a dispiriting message about Western priorities: rich Westerners' pets mattered more than Afghan lives.

Three former members of Ghani's presidential security detail, continuously on the move, were evading capture in Kabul: they would have lasted less than five minutes had the Haqqanis or ISIS-K found them. As the 31 August deadline neared, we had six separate processes running to try and get them out. These included a British military effort to get their names into the UK evacuation system, which required finding (and convincing) a

senior UK military sponsor. The UK military turned them down on the grounds that, however deserving in principle, others were deemed at more immediate risk.

Separately, we hassled the UK and US military on the ground in Kabul to ensure their names were in the separate system there. The names were also put forward to the UN as humanitarian cases but rejected as the organisation was not planning to handle any government employees. On appeal—by this time Greg Mills, in particular, was wearing out his welcome with senior contacts—their case was reconsidered on humanitarian grounds, but again rejected as UN High Commissioner for Refugees was 'only handling IDPs [Internally Displaced People] and refugees.' We were told to 'approach the Americans'. If only.

Even as resourceful military and intelligence veterans were mobilising in real time, forming networks across the globe, working through the bottlenecks and getting people out, governments and international organisations seemed paralysed at best, uninterested at worst. These same organisations had spent $1 trillion on operations in Afghanistan over two decades; now they seemed to have no interest in lifting a finger to help the Afghans they were abandoning.

This refers to institutions, not individuals. The soldiers and civilian agency personnel on the ground in Kabul, and the individual diplomats doing their best under atrocious conditions of stress, lack of sleep, constant chaos and zero policy guidance, were outstanding, as good individually as their parent organisations were contemptible.

The system that ultimately evolved for most of the ad hoc networks, and worked most efficiently, was to divide the exfiltration process into five segments: the journey to the airport, getting through the gates, processing potential passengers, getting them onto a plane, and eventually to their final destination.

The critical part was ensuring that manifests matched those held by the military guarding the airport complex, and that the Taliban would allow passage to the airport. If we could get them inside, it was highly likely evacuees would get onto a plane to safety. But running the gauntlet of Taliban checkpoints, navigating the crush of desperate crowds at the airport entrance, and moving through the endless traffic jams around Kabul was even harder.

It would not have taken a rocket scientist to devise a better, more orderly, system. A multilingual call-centre could have been established, in nearby India for example, to take calls, provide case numbers and process people, rather than leaving them to scramble for favours from friends, or for finances from family. This, and the early call-up of the Civil Reserve Aircraft Fleet, would have alleviated the congestion greatly, as would have the early stationing of military forces and some strong-arming of the Taliban to extend the deadline to the point where nobody obviously at risk would be left behind.

But none of this was ever going to happen since it would have required some form of backbone, moral fortitude and will, and if Western leaders had possessed any of these qualities, we would not have been in this position in the first place.

Leaving aside the decision to depart from Afghanistan, which (as discussed later) could be justified on strategic grounds, the laughably incompetent, execrably chaotic execution of the evacuation plan spoke to a complete collapse of will by those in power across multiple coalition countries. Most particularly the US government, as lead nation in the coalition—having unilaterally decided to withdraw without informing, let alone co-ordinating with, its allies until the catastrophe was already unfolding—must bear the lion's share of responsibility.

Likewise, it was not lost on the two of us that we spent weeks of our lives, working several continuous stretches of 36 or, on one occasion, 50 hours and making enormous efforts to help evacuate members of the Afghan president's personal staff, while President Ghani and his senior advisers sat in Dubai, never offering to help or even asking for an update. But, in truth, all of us were at fault.

It was not good enough, in the face of what was known about the Taliban, to say that the international mission was over, that it had accomplished its objectives (when it so obviously had not), or that we had to stick to the deadline no matter what. The media spent a lot of time comparing the fiasco to the evacuation from Vietnam—which actually did a disservice to those who organized that evacuation, which was dramatically better-run and more effective than this one.

This was a moment to be equated not only with Vietnam, but with the exodus of European Jews fleeing the Nazis only to find the gates of America and Western Europe slammed in their faces. The excuse offered

for that betrayal—'if only we knew then what we knew later'—might have flown in the pre-instant media, pre-internet age. But everyone knew the likely nature of a Taliban regime, even though politicians offered the ridiculously lame excuse that this time the Taliban might be more moderate, things would not be so bad, and we had a deadline to meet. It was an utterly callous and shameful betrayal, pulling the rug out from under the Afghan government then leaving in haste and disarray, pausing only to pull up the ladder behind ourselves.

This careless, parallel-universe nature of political wishful thinking was epitomised by White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki's statement at a press briefing. 'If the Taliban claim to want international legitimacy, these actions [taking over Kabul] are not going to get them the legitimacy they seek … they could choose to devote the same energy to the peace process as they are to their military campaign. We strongly urge them to do so.' As the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial of 12 August 2021 drily noted, 'Strongly urging should do the trick.'

Little wonder that First Vice-President of Afghanistan, Amrullah Saleh, could scarcely contain his disgust at Washington's intentions in discussions in Kabul during June and July 2021. 'Do you know even the weapons we have on our helicopters,' he asked during one meeting, 'expire in September 2021. It is difficult,' he said, 'not to think that this is deliberate.'

Amrullah in Wonderland

Saleh read a verse from the mediaeval Persian poet Saadi Shirazi:

Human beings are members of a whole
A creation of one essence and soul
If one member is afflicted with pain
Other members uneasy will remain
If you have no sympathy for human pain
The name of human you cannot remain

'This is the essence of the Charter of the United Nations,' said Afghanistan's then Vice President, 'nearly 1,000 years after Shirazi wrote these words.' Meeting in his office in Kabul's Green Zone in July 2021, Saleh was angry at the way the US and its allies had let down their cause. 'Colonial powers, big powers and mighty powers never understood us,' he

observed. ‘They stayed twenty years and still they don’t understand us. The West,’ he noted, ‘is generous, but not smart.’

Saleh could not understand why the West had ignored the role of Pakistan in his government’s increasingly obvious downfall. ‘This is not an operation designed last week. Rather, it was designed by the Pakistani General Staff ten years ago and directed from Pakistan. The West knows this,’ he said. More scathingly, ‘the West should not escape its moral obligation. The way the West notified us was immoral. If you want to leave, that is totally fine. But don’t negotiate with the Taliban and then depart. This leaves us to defend,’ he noted presciently, ‘to manage the mess, pain and uncertainty.’

To do so, he understood that Afghans would have to depart ‘from the Western-centric environment which we have operated in for the last two decades. We inherited 210 bases from the US, [all needing] to be supplied by air. But we have the assets to supply just 80 by air. This has left us,’ he said five weeks before the government fell, ‘psychologically defeated.’ He referred to *The Billion Dollar Base* (a documentary about the dismantling and destruction of the British Forces’ Camp Bastion in Helmand) as a case of the inappropriateness of Western attitudes and approaches.[10] ‘On weapons, 100% we should listen to [the West]’ he added. ‘On tactics, 100% we shouldn’t.’

That same day, 5 July 2021, Greg Mills met with former president Hamid Karzai and President Ashraf Ghani. Their comments revealed—perhaps inadvertently—why the government would collapse so quickly.

A visibly agitated Karzai picked up the theme of external meddling. He cited the notion of a ‘Tournament of Shadows,’ a phrase coined by Count Karl Vasilyevich Nesselrode, the Russian Tsar’s Foreign Minister from 1822 to 1856, to describe the interference of imperial powers in Afghanistan, what Karzai termed ‘the old wolf’ of the region. Karzai called for less foreign involvement and greater domestic ownership.

‘In the Soviet invasion,’ he said, ‘you see the consequences of today. The invasion created a national resistance supported by the US and Pakistan, with Islamabad used as a tool against the Soviets, where Islamism was used to confront Communism. When [US President Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor] Zbigniew Brzezinski was asked, “at what cost does the United States pursue this strategy?” he answered, “At no cost to us”.’

Karzai argued that the way to turn the situation around was ‘to free ourselves from the foreign hands’. To do so, he said there needed to be ‘domestic unity…with the right messages and sending money in this direction to create moral unification.’ Karzai, who had effectively been placed into office by those same ‘foreign hands’ two decades earlier, and whose rule had been marked by the emergence of a patronage system that was remarkably corrupt even by post-occupation Afghan standards, might have done better had he followed his own advice. At least Karzai showed personal bravery when the city fell a few weeks later, remaining in the Arg and posting a photo of himself, flanked by his three young daughters, standing his ground to await the Taliban.

Ashraf Ghani, Karzai’s successor, proved less willing to do so. Five weeks before the collapse he said that the violence gripping the country was the ‘beginning of a descent into a potentially severe civil war’ and that the Taliban had ‘made a serious mistake and miscalculated by unleashing violence during the international withdrawal.’ He said this was ‘the first phase’. Once ‘stabilisation’ was achieved by his government, through ‘rolling back’ the Taliban, a ceasefire and political agreement would follow, then the formation of a power-sharing government, and the election of a legitimate government.

The *beginning* of a descent into a *potentially* severe civil war? Stabilisation and roll-back? A negotiated power-sharing agreement? Reading these words after the fall, one might ask whether Ghani was merely stupid, actively lying, or engaged in a titanic act of self-deception.

The fact is that he was none of these things: an extremely intelligent man, cerebral and scholarly to a fault, he, like everyone else, had underestimated the Taliban, and like almost everyone (including both of us), had believed the repeated assurances from President Biden of continued support—including airstrikes and other combat support—which, in the event, never materialised. Ghani was also in a bubble, isolated from reality by his gatekeepers and close advisers, who themselves were cut off from the combat reality of battlefields they almost never visited.

The American decision to withdraw, Ghani observed, was ‘not about money, but the potential loss of life of Americans. This arrangement did not leave room for a transition’. So his government had not had time for ‘the preparation that was necessary for such a rapid transition, where tactical

weaknesses—for example in the supply of contracted aircraft maintenance—became strategic issues.'

This statement, too, was surreal, since every US president since George W. Bush had been pushing for a withdrawal, Donald Trump had set a date for it the previous year, and Joe Biden had announced the withdrawal some three months before this conversation. In Ghani's defence, it's worth pointing out that he was not the only one to ignore Trump and Biden, telling himself they could not possibly mean what they were saying: the Pentagon and the State Department had slow-rolled, obfuscated and ignored Trump and seemed caught by surprise when Biden insisted on the withdrawal.

Ghani pointed to a second major driver of withdrawal: Afghanistan's neighbours. 'Unless the region supports a peace process, the prospects for growth are diminished. Only one country is betting everything on the Taliban—Pakistan.' Ghani believed this was 'the greatest mistake its government had made for its national interest' since 'Pakistan will not remain immune to the impact of the Taliban given its completely open border with Afghanistan,' which he compared to the border between Burundi and the Congo. As a consequence, 'the security situation will quickly become very difficult for them'.

To address this, Ghani argued for 'accommodation' between India and Pakistan, the stabilisation and recalculation by Pakistan 'which has relied on a combination of its location and regional crises to receive resources since 1954, despite which it is losing ground to India and its war internally'. He also argued for the involvement of Iran 'out of fear of Afghanistan as a hub for Sunni-based movements,' and the 'creation of a regional compact modelled,' he proposed, 'along the lines of the Shanghai Co-operation Forum.'

Ghani had, indeed, recently attended a meeting of the Chinese-sponsored forum, clearly seeking Beijing's support as the coalition departure loomed. Unfortunately for him, China was leaning the other way, as foreign minister Wang Yi made clear a few weeks later when he publicly met, and effectively legitimised, a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

To transform its position at the centre of the region's security crisis, Ghani argued, 'Afghanistan needs to declare its permanent neutrality, to avoid becoming a bone of contention among its neighbours'. This would demand 'taking into account the reality that Pakistan and Iran (and others)

in the region have several competing centres of power in their own systems, including the executive, intelligence services, armed forces, government and parliament'.

He acknowledged that 'the government after 2001 had chosen very badly in choosing personal gain over national reform. Now everyone can see that the state is essential to stability, and of the need to create coherence around the Republic'. As ever, Ghani's ideas were insightful but, apart from being much, much too late in the day, he showed no notion of how to execute any of them, nor had he done so in his six years as president.

Only the previous day, we had been with Ahmad Massoud, the British-educated son of the legendary mujahideen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated by Al-Qaeda suicide attackers two days before 9/11. Fittingly for someone with a better grasp than Ghani of the frontline reality faced by his fighters, Massoud pointed out the obvious. 'We need to stop the Taliban from advancing, otherwise a new narrative [of peace] won't make a difference. To do so, we need to bring about a national consensus, and to do that, we need to have a more inclusive government.'

In essence, he called on Ghani 'to bring others on board' and to do so 'within weeks'. Again, this was the right idea, albeit too late—Ghani had been refusing to countenance a transitional administration for more than a year, while assiduously side-lining regional commanders like Massoud and their forces and refusing to seek consensus.

Ghani's grip on reality was never more obviously slipping than when he said, in this conversation, that his government would be able to deal with terrorism and the Taliban more easily in the absence of international forces. 'We will deal with the Taliban through the force of patriotism. The Taliban used to say we are the puppets; now people are saying the Taliban are the puppets. This view is compounded by the level of destruction by the Taliban in areas of the country,' he noted. 'We are now,' President Ghani said, 'at the beginning of the civil war'. He was wrong of course: it was nearly the end.

Neither Karzai nor Ghani had any kind of practical plan, or even any strategic conception of how to stop the Taliban at this stage. Karzai did not mention it at all, noting only that greater unity was necessary, created through the flow of resources, a philosophy that had characterised his government and eventually undone it. While not disagreeing on the need to consolidate forces around defendable urban centres, Ghani said that he

needed ‘the air force to disabuse the Taliban of victory. This issue,’ he affirmed, ‘needs to be resolved’.

But even then, staring disaster in the face, Ghani was fearful of the consequences of rocking the boat, recognising the vulnerability of his regime to the loss of outside support, a risk he had tried to manage on his trip to Washington in June 2021. ‘We are determined to have unity, coherence,’ said Ghani after meeting Biden on 25 June. He said the US’s decision to withdraw troops was a sovereign one, and it was Kabul’s job to ‘manage the consequences’. Privately he said that while he could have ‘taken the matter to our friends in the House [of Representatives] and made a domestic political affair out of it’, he preferred to see this as a new stage in the relationship.[11]

If Ghani sounded like a cuckolded husband, trying to convince himself everything was OK—a ‘new stage in the relationship’—he was not the only one. ‘Please’, said Saleh, grabbing Greg’s arm on the way down the stairs of his office in July 2021, ‘don’t write about this. I don’t want to upset the Americans’.[12] He need not have worried, as it turned out.

* * *

There is plenty of blame to go around, as this book will show, in the attempts to stabilise Afghanistan and build peace after 9/11. Both of us are to blame, as are many others. The signs of collapse had been there a long time, often conveniently ignored as they were ill-suited to the political narrative of ‘making progress’ and then, as the deadline loomed, accomplishing the mission.

US Vice-President Kamala Harris argued, in a manner laughably unconvincing even for her, as she attempted to reassure rattled Asian allies after the Taliban takeover, that the mission had ‘achieved what we had gone there to do’.[13] The extent to which that assertion was believed might be ascertained from the comments of her host, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. He said during Harris’s visit that perceptions of the US’s resolve and commitment would be determined by ‘what the US does going forward, how it repositions itself in the region, how it engages its broad range of friends and partners and allies…’.[14]

The month before he fled the Arg, leaving Aziz literally holding the bag on the helicopter pad, Ghani said, ‘A Taliban government would condemn

the next six generations to slavery; some ethnic groups will be isolated, and women will be confined to hell.'

Having been finance minister in Karzai's government in 2002–2004, then Chancellor of Kabul University till 2008, Ghani published *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Building a Fractured World* with Clare Lockhart that same year. The book was a cogent critique of the international community's piecemeal and incoherent response to the Afghan problem.

Ghani and Lockhart offered a framework for coordinated action that could reorient the aid system 'towards building capable states'. Their framework advocates a 'citizen-based approach' organised around a 'double compact' between country leaders and the international community, on the one hand, and country leaders and their citizens, on the other.[15]

The book suggested that developmental pathways for failed states exist if guided by lessons from others, prudent domestic actions, and co-ordinated and sustained international efforts. They proposed a method for generating comparative data on state capacity—a so-called 'sovereignty index'—along with 10 key functions for assessing the 'sovereignty gap' in a state, thereby facilitating appropriate policy interventions. These included a legitimate monopoly on the means of violence; administrative control; management of public finances; investment in human capital; delineation of citizen rights and duties; provision of infrastructure services; formation of the market; management of state assets; international relations; and rule of law.[16]

Ghani's perennial political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, has critiqued Ghani's indices by saying that there were 'so many flaws in our own system: bad elections one after another; Ghani not trusting the people and the sense of mistrust between him and all of the leaders in the country; corruption; the distance between the people and their government'; as well as a weak peace deal with the Taliban and 'the role of different countries' in the collapse. Abdullah, who narrowly lost to Ghani in two elections (both tainted by credible allegations of fraud), described his rival as a 'national traitor'.[17]

With the benefit of hindsight, Afghanistan and the hapless Ghani obviously score a failing grade on some or all of his own criteria. Many Afghans would, however, defend his record, saying that it was only the American withdrawal that precipitated Afghanistan's collapse, in spite of enormous progress on virtually all of Ghani's sovereignty indices.

Many in Washington agreed; conventional Beltway wisdom before the collapse was that the regime could survive for at least a decent interval of a few months. As Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley said, three days after Ghani fled Kabul, that the Afghan government fell faster than anyone expected. 'Intelligence clearly indicated multiple scenarios were possible: one of those was an outright Taliban takeover following a rapid collapse of the Afghan Security Forces and the government,' he said. However, the timeframe of the rapid collapse was widely estimated to range from weeks to months, and even years, following the US's departure. 'There was nothing that I or anybody else saw that indicated a collapse of this army and this government in eleven days.'

On 8 July 2021, a few days after Greg Mills met Ghani, Amrullah and Massoud in the through-the-looking-glass bubble of the Arg in Kabul, Biden showed he was in his own alternative reality. He responded with characteristically senescent irritability and incoherence when asked about intelligence assessments he had allegedly seen, predicting the rapid collapse of the Afghan government once US forces withdrew. 'That is not true. They did not—they didn't—did not reach that conclusion,' he said. 'But there's not a conclusion that, in fact, they cannot defeat the Taliban.'[18]

Afghanistan collapsed on the watch of a cerebral head of state globally respected for his expertise on state failure and civil wars. Yet Ghani's failure to translate theory into practice, and to master the politics of Afghanistan, was not unique. For one, the international, and Afghan, political objectives of constitutionalism, centralising power and promoting democracy never matched Afghan (or, equally importantly, regional) realities. Nor did NATO or the international community offer the resources or sustained attention needed to enable a politically sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Western withdrawal from Afghanistan went hand in hand with a narrative of defeat, repeated so often it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, in the process damaging Western moral authority and the credibility of any US-led alliance. In excusing their failures, some maintained that the mission had been 'unwinnable' from the outset because:

– Afghanistan is not a country, or at least a nation that people within its borders identify with. Rather it is a collection of warring tribes and clans

to which sub-national groups its citizens first and foremost owe their loyalty.
- It is a narco-state without a proper economy. As a result, there is little to no chance of having a government which can, given its criminal foundations, govern according to the rule of law.
- A corrupt and incompetent government was never likely, as was the case with Saigon in the 1960s and 1970s, to win the support of a majority of its people.
- The military mission represented classic mission creep, a so-called 'forever war', pursued to serve the 'military-industrial complex' rather than the national interest.

None of these statements holds up to the slightest scrutiny. Almost all of them are made by pundits who have never visited Afghanistan, never opened a book on Afghan history or culture, speak no regional languages, have no Afghan friends, have never spoken to a member of the Taliban, who know no actual Afghans (who they often refer to as 'Afghanis'—the name of Afghanistan's currency, not its people) and discovered themselves in 2021 to be instant experts on a war they had forgotten or ignored for years.

Such punditry is often accompanied by clichés about the West having the watches but Afghans having the time, or that you 'can't buy an Afghan, only rent one', even a pithy quote about the 'graveyard of empires' delivered in a suitably tweed-wearing, pipe-smoking tone.

The armchair experts of 2021 are about 140 years behind the game: Lord Hartington, Secretary of State for India in the Liberal government, made all the same points in a letter to the Viceroy of India in May 1880. 'It appears' Hartington wrote, 'that as the result of two successful campaigns, of the employment of an enormous force, and of the expenditure of large sums of money, all that has yet been accomplished has been the disintegration of the state which it was desired to see strong, friendly and independent.'

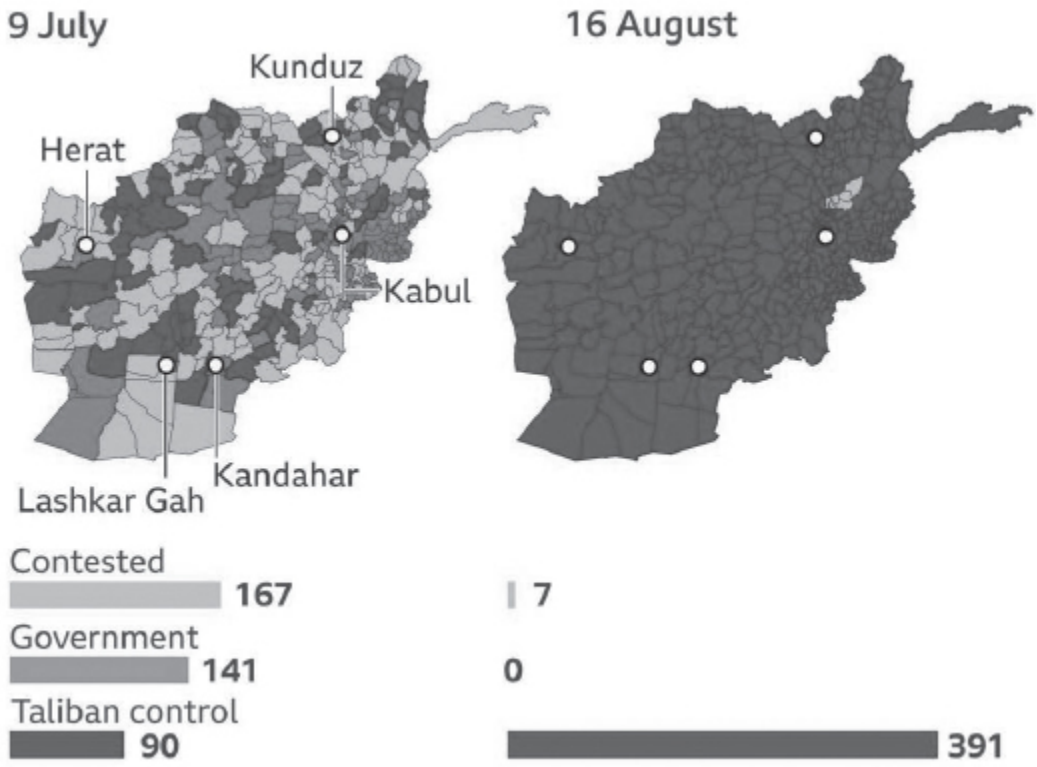
Whatever the analogy, the argument is the same: any amount of pessimism is justified, these missions never work, and the whole enterprise was doomed from the start. But this is, of course, overly simplistic and a massive cop-out. If the mission was doomed from the start, then we are only at fault for naïvely believing the unwinnable war could be won.

Turning Afghanistan around was never going to be easy: this much is true for any country where there is extreme instability with underlying tribal and other divisions that feed such disorder. This also means, inevitably, that while a crushing defeat—regime change if you will—can be relatively quickly engineered, the societal, economic and governance aspects will prove a much greater task, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, including in many places in Africa.

As we will argue in the chapters that follow, the truth is far worse than this: the task in Afghanistan was absolutely achievable, the war eminently winnable—but we failed to achieve the mission, screwed up the effort from start to finish, and we have now been defeated. That much had been achieved in transforming Afghan society in terms of health-care, education, women's development and communications is undeniable, as much as there were grievous and sometimes egregious mistakes made. Yet finding the means to maintain the influence and resources to keep Afghanistan on this path in the face of flagging Western political commitment proved much more difficult. The logic of collapse has flowed from the path and pace of the negotiations carried out from 2018, when it became clear that Washington wanted out, in the words of one senior intelligence figure, 'come what may'.[19]

At a strategic level, as discussed in Chapter Four, there was no reason to remove the 2,500 NATO troops that remained in the country by mid-2021. Signalling an emotional and incomprehensible target date for departure on the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 simply collapsed Afghan government morale while giving the Taliban no reason to negotiate further. It may even have accelerated the 2021 offensive by opening Taliban commanders' eyes to a possible propaganda prize: the ability to recapture all of Afghanistan by the 9/11 anniversary. At the tactical level, extremely costly mistakes were made, including the manner in which the withdrawal was announced and the way it proceeded, catalysing a government collapse through a failure of morale, first, and then of material capability.

On 9 July, when Greg Mills left Afghanistan on his last visit, the Taliban's control of districts sat at 90 out of 398, with 167 contested; by 16 August 2021, all bar seven districts were under Taliban authority.[20]



America's late-night abandonment of Bagram Air Base, long deemed vital to the security of Kabul and holding about 5,000 mostly Taliban prisoners, infuriated and dismayed the Afghan government, which saw it as emblematic of a withdrawal carried out to a US political timetable with no thought of the implications for America's Afghan allies or, for that matter, its NATO partners. As one senior Afghan official put it, 'People are saying: "The Americans didn't ask Afghans about coming here, and they didn't consult Afghans about leaving".'

The new Afghan commander at Bagram, General Mir Asadullah Kohistani, only discovered American forces had gone several hours after their 03:00 departure on the morning of Friday 2 July. 'We did not know of their timeline for departure. They did not tell us when they left,' he said. The departing Americans had turned off the electricity on the way out, which served as a signal for looters who smashed barriers, ransacked buildings and loaded up whatever they could lay their hands on from the 3.5 million items left behind, from drinks to meals, even cars.

A Pentagon spokesman confessed that the exact moment of the departure 'was not divulged for operational security purposes.' This came on the back, days earlier, of a comment from President Biden, refusing to

spoil his Fourth of July celebrations by answering questions on Afghanistan as he wanted to talk about 'happy things'.[21]

Our withdrawal was literally fly-by-night. Until the abandonment of Bagram, one could perhaps argue that the struggle for modernity and democracy in Afghanistan had not failed but was instead incomplete. Bagram signalled the end of the illusion, the collapse of a mission of twenty years.

* * *

Reflecting on the echoes of Vietnam for Afghanistan, Viet Thanh Nguyen observed that unfortunately it was not up to America alone to declare the war over. 'The nightmare,' he wrote, 'doesn't end for Afghans after the last American leaves.' The collapse of the South Vietnamese government was equally sudden, he reminds us.

The desperate scenes on grainy film of people clinging to boats or cramming themselves frantically onto planes appeared to have been from another age—until the same images were replicated in Kabul. In Da Nang, South Vietnam, armed troops fired on departing aircraft that were leaving them behind. At Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airfield, 'friendly' artillery fire blasted aircraft on the runway.

Nearly five decades later, in the age of instant communication, the same occurred in Kabul, with C-17 transports packed to the gunwales and passengers falling to their deaths from handholds outside or crushed in the wheel wells. The irony of the Afghan and Vietnam comparison, which Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken both strenuously resisted, is that the 'evacuation of Saigon, chaotic as it was, was better planned than the American endgame for Kabul'.[22]

There are reasons why states collapse in an accelerating manner, why the war appears to speed up, going into fast-forward just before the end, and we discuss these endgame dynamics in detail in Chapter Four. But a clear contributing factor was the binary thinking of successive US governments.

The Biden administration, like Trump's before it, characterised the choice in Afghanistan as stay or go, while blaming the Afghan military for failing to defend the regime. This black-and-white characterisation obscures the myriad choices and tools available. There were diplomatic alternatives,

and there were military options for staying, as sustainable long-term commitments in Korea, Japan, Germany, Cyprus, Malaysia and elsewhere illustrate.

This false binary obscures, too, the responsibility of Westerners to Afghans. As Nguyen argued in August 2021, 'Our obligation to help Afghans in mortal danger extends beyond the present moment and well into the years ahead.' It requires a short-term focus on evacuation, resettlement, refugee support and other humanitarian imperatives; it also demands that we consider longer-term questions about the relationship with a Taliban government, the Afghan opposition, and the region.

Nearly a million Vietnamese fled by sea, undertaking journeys in which tens of thousands perished. Many lingered in refugee camps, while some never settled at all. 'They are part of the human toll,' says Nguyen, 'that continued to grow for years after the official end of the war. This is what the Afghan people face, with the certainty that as the Taliban seize Kabul, there will be potentially terrible recriminations for those who allied with the Americans.'

Rather than encouraging a greater sense of urgency in helping Afghans, or negotiating with the Taliban, the desperate scenes in Kabul seemed only to strengthen the Biden administration's resolve to leave. But just as the decision to invade Iraq was never supported by the actual evidence, the same was true for the decision to leave Afghanistan.

Another particular danger of the Saigon metaphor is that it allowed Americans to view the tragedy in Afghanistan as many people viewed the end in South Vietnam—as a spectacle, a singular moment in history. We know this to be folly. 'The people of Afghanistan do not deserve this,' tweeted Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*.[23] Like the Vietnamese in their own country, the costs will be borne mainly by the Afghans. The debacle is, however, a result of mutual political failure—in the final analysis, we failed each other.

* * *

In considering where the Afghan mission went wrong—and what went right—there is a need to look forward in Afghanistan, in its region and farther afield, to future modalities and patterns of engagement. Afghanistan, for one, will now have to find its own way, with implications that may be

uncomfortable to Western norms and sensitivities. The West in Afghanistan did not deliver a victory for the Afghan people. The question is now: can its departure allow for one?

Failure should not mean retreat. As Peter Ricketts, the former British diplomat, notes, there is an imperative to stay engaged with Afghanistan, a debt owed to the Afghan people, not least in keeping a spotlight on how a Taliban-dominated government behaves, in the hope that Taliban 2.0 may emerge as a more moderate force. The world is not completely without leverage here: one important tool is the restoration of aid flows, both for maintaining influence with the Taliban and in support of humanitarian efforts.

Of course, we should not kid ourselves. Taliban methods are unikely to be much prettier than twenty years ago, nor their international links more benign. Afghanistan is, moreover, not the country or society it was in 1996 when the Taliban were welcomed by many as a stabilising force freeing the country from the violent and costly anarchy of feuding mujahideen warlords. The world is watching to see how the new Taliban will rule and how the relationships that kept it armed and funded for the last two decades will develop.

The word *Taliban* (meaning ‘students’) is, of course, a plural. And whereas the Taliban were able to unite for a cause, against Western puppets, infidels and country-sellers (in their laconic phrase), they are divided geographically, tribally and ideologically between moderates and conservatives, northerners and Kandaharis, those who hate the Pakistanis and those (like the Haqqanis) who dance to their tune, and of course those who now find themselves in power in Kabul and those still on the outside. Islamabad, for one, as the principal sponsor of the Taliban, may well come to regret the fall of a relatively affluent, well-supported government across its border, given Pakistan’s own Taliban problem, extremism issues and frayed domestic politics.

At another level, given the profound damage caused by the Afghan collapse to the perceived efficacy of military intervention and to NATO’s credibility, there is a need to restore confidence and a sense of purpose in these institutions. But there is also a need to focus on the failure of politics and political leadership. If wars come about because of a failure of politics, they likewise have to end through political compromise and settlement.

In Afghanistan, the international effort was prosecuted primarily through military tools. The metrics were progressively dumbed down over time, reduced to American interests around terrorism and domestic politics rather than the politics and costs inside Afghanistan. Washington preferred a quick and clean end to the conflict, to deal with the fallout and move the conversation on.

Former British Prime Minister Theresa May was among those who said it was 'incomprehensible and worrying' that the UK could not work with other nations to 'sustain' an Afghan government after an American withdrawal. In paying tribute to those who served in Afghanistan, she said, 'The politicians sent them there. The politicians decided to withdraw. The politicians must be responsible for the consequences.'[24]

Diplomacy was also a loser in Afghanistan in its failure to bring about the means to engage with Pakistan or manage its existential conflict with India. This problem will not disappear under a Taliban government; it may instead heighten regional conflict. Similarly, the failure to engage with Iran, Russia and China in a collaborative rather than competitive fashion cost the Afghan mission dearly. In simple terms, the Afghan crisis of 2021 should force a rethink by Western policymakers, offering an opportunity to redefine priorities according to an honest assessment of capabilities and appetite.[25]

* * *

Tom Tugendhat, chair of the UK House of Common's Foreign Affairs Committee, says, 'It's not armies that win wars … they can just about make room for peace, make room for people like us to talk, to compromise, to listen. Its nations that make war. Nations endure, Nations mobilise and muster. Nations determine and have patience. And here we have demonstrated sadly that we, the West, the United Kingdom, does not.' Highlighting the imperative of patience, he said we had to 'recognise that forever peace is bought not cheaply but hard, through determination and the will to endure.' 'Defeat,' notes Tugendhat, 'is when you no longer have the choice on how to help'.[26]

Tugendhat is an exception, one of several in the British parliament, the US Congress and elsewhere who actually served in Afghanistan and understood the strategic stakes, tactical realities and moral choices

involved. The late-breaking and cynical parochialism of other political leaders, to which we have become more and more accustomed of late, stands in stark contrast to the commitment and dedication of the people they put in place to carry out their policies. Without those on the ground, what we saw in the raw and visceral chaos of Kabul is all we would ever get. The soldiers and civilian volunteers did what was asked of them, and more, with honour and courage. The political failure is not their fault.

War, proverbially, brings out the best and the worst in people. For the West, it was a meld of generosity with impatience, idealism with hubris, and compassion with indifference. For the Afghans, the warmth of need was matched with the cunning of greed.

This book identifies and assesses the failures of the West's approach to Afghanistan—military, diplomatic, political and developmental. It considers how these failures might be remedied in future, similar, peacebuilding missions when these inevitably occur. For Afghans, the war is not over simply because the West has declared it so, neither will its geopolitical effects disappear with the last of the foreign forces.[27] Afghanistan remains connected to the world through communications and the networks that developed since the Taliban last held sway.

Global communications, migration and governance ensure that conflicts, once remote, are now part of the mainstream, no matter the desire of the West or others to be left out of them.

The lessons go beyond Afghanistan, too, to the future battlefields of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, to jihadist and revanchist movements in East Asia and Eastern Africa. In this way, the failure in Afghanistan is part and parcel of a broader set of challenges for outsiders from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, NGOs and charities seeking to promote development and stability in countries. Their challenge is the same test we faced (and ultimately failed) in Afghanistan: how can outsiders help insiders to do better?

While there are no easy answers—indeed, there may be no actual answers at all—to this question, we hope this book will help to start that conversation.

* * *

* $ refers to USD unless otherwise indicated.

* The text messages are included here verbatim.

1

AN EVOLVING CAMPAIGN

'Our hope is that we will see a relatively stable government in Afghanistan, one that…provides the foundation for future reconstruction of that country.'

Senator Joe Biden, 2001

'[The] alternative to nation-building is chaos, a chaos that churns out bloodthirsty warlords, drug traffickers and terrorists.'

Senator Joe Biden, 2003

'Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation-building.'

President Joe Biden, 16 August 2021

Nearly 3,000 people died in the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001. Americans—and television viewers around the world—watched the largest terror attack on American soil unfold live on television as suicide bombers flew the aircraft they had hijacked into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon. The towers burned and collapsed, taking neighbouring buildings with them with such violence that downtown New York, covered in a grey shroud of ash and paper, resembled the set of an improbable Hollywood thriller. When the shock had subsided,

the clamour for a swift and brutal response grew, and US President George W. Bush responded.

On 18 September, President Bush signed into law a joint resolution authorising the use of force against those responsible for attacking the United States on 9/11. The war against Al-Qaeda and its hosts, the Taliban, began on 7 October, when the US military, with British support, began a bombing campaign against Taliban forces, launching Operation Enduring Freedom. The response, engineered by the United States and supported by its key allies, notably the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Tony Blair, was simple. It followed a plan, developed by the Central Intelligence Agency and supported by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, that applied a 'light footprint'. This was essentially the reinforcement of Northern Alliance guerrillas who had held out against the odds against the Taliban, supported by Western special operations forces (SOF) and air power, in an effort to remove Al-Qaeda—the terrorist organisation run by Osama bin Laden that was responsible for the destruction of the twin towers—by toppling its Taliban hosts.

As President Bush put it at the time, 'We are not fielding a nation-building military. We are a fighting military. We need to define the mission clearly.'[1] Bush and others, including National Security Advisor (and later Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice, had criticised the outgoing Clinton administration for what was termed 'international social work' in trying to make the world a better place through forays such as Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia.[2]

Despite intending to follow a more restrained foreign policy on coming into office at the start of 2001, after 9/11 the Bush administration faced 'only unpalatable choices', as US scholar and commentator Robert Kagan observes. It was trying to prevent a descent into chaos after the fall of the Taliban, while staying out of nation building. 'In the end,' notes Kagan, 'Bush officials decided they had no choice but to stay for a while and try to establish a government that would allow American troops eventually to depart without fear of a return to the pre-9/11 circumstances.' It involved doing 'what the US military has always done, or tried to do, when engaged in occupations in Vietnam and in the Balkans in the 20th Century, in Cuba and the Philippines decades before that, and even in the South after the Civil War: building schools and hospitals, trying to reduce corruption and to improve local administration.'[3]

While the initial aim was to remove Afghanistan as a safe haven for Al-Qaeda terrorists, and that meant going after the Taliban who refused to give them up for cultural and ideological reasons, this quickly changed once complacency about the depth of the problem in Afghanistan had been swept away by facts on the ground. As Rumsfeld put it to Lieutenant General Dan McNeill, the US Army's senior commander on the ground in the spring of 2002, 'Do two things—pursue terrorists to capture or kill and build an Afghan National Army.'[4] Yet, as McNeill notes, he had no written campaign plan, and the Secretary of Defense had provided no specifics about the size or shape of an army he wanted in Afghanistan.

Rather, the plan evolved organically, through iteration, subject to changes in personalities of ambassadors, commanders and politicians. It was driven also by institutional imperatives, not least the need for NATO to redefine itself in a post-Cold War world. The war in Afghanistan was striking both for the limited influence allies had on the United States (despite some, including NATO leaders, making the case for war in part as a way to maintain such influence) and in its absence of strategic, as opposed to operational, art.

This was not the first time a superpower had become mired in Afghanistan, as Rodric Braithwaite writes in *Afgantsy*, his history of the Soviet-Afghan War, 'After a successful operation [the Soviets] would return to their bases and hand responsibility to their Afghan allies. But the government's military and civilian representatives found it impossible to operate amid a hostile population. … In the end,' he observes, 'the Russians had good tactics but no workable strategy. They could win their fights, but they could not convincingly win the war. Their best efforts, military and political, went for nothing. They eventually had no choice but to disentangle themselves as best they could.'[5]

If anything, in the initial absence of a strategic plan for Afghanistan, the focus of the mission was essentially to maintain the international alliance, 'of being alongside the United States,' as one British marine who undertook four tours of Helmand put it,[6] 'at their moment of need to conduct a counter-terrorism operation'. The subsequent state-building process required considerable energy, determination and commitment, not to say political will, in confronting various malign domestic and regional actors. By 2020, total US military expenditure in the Afghan war was over $2 trillion, including future liabilities and veteran costs.[7] While the bulk of this

money was spent on counter-insurgency operations, $137 billion was earmarked for reconstruction and development. Half of this went to building up Afghan security forces, including the Afghan National Army (ANA), intelligence service (the National Directorate of Security, NDS) and Afghan National Police (ANP).

The cost was huge in other ways, too. By the final withdrawal in August 2021, coalition military fatalities had reached 3,590, of which the US (2,465) and UK (450) had suffered the greatest losses.[8] More than 35,000 coalition troops had been wounded or injured in action.[9] To this bloody bill must be added more than 4,000 civilian contractor fatalities in what had become America's and NATO's longest war.

The price paid by Afghans was staggering. More than 100,000 were killed or wounded in the decade after 2009, when the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan began documenting casualties,[10] including up to 70,000 members of the Afghan military and police. By 2016, the Taliban was killing an average of 22 Afghan soldiers and policemen each day with this figure rising threefold during 2018.[11] By the time the Ghani government fell in August 2021, it was losing 5,000 soldiers and police per month to casualties and defections. Human costs aside, one-third of Afghanistan's budget was allocated to military or security expenditure.[12]

The scale of this sacrifice should, however, not put a patina of justification over the West's shortcomings throughout its intervention and stability mission in Afghanistan. The conventional narrative is that a combination of anorexic Western forces, weak US revolve (epitomised by the argument that 'we don't do nation-building' and beset by fear of being sucked into another Vietnam), plus the distraction of Iraq, led to disappointment with the Afghan 'project'.

These difficulties, and eventually failures, were the result of a lack of understanding of the Taliban and of Afghanistan, and of poor planning and limited patience. 'I felt like we were high-school students who had wandered into a Mafia-owned bar,' said General Stanley McChrystal on his arrival in Afghanistan in 2002.[13] Or as one member of his planning staff put it even more directly, 'It was stated US policy that they didn't do nation building in 2002. It was all about bear hunting.'[14]

Failure was less down to what other people did—or didn't do.

It was down to the consequences of a weakness in leadership and political direction of epic proportions among the people who were responsible for making the decisions. The blame for this must lie squarely with George W. Bush and Tony Blair, first among equals of those who set the direction for events in Afghanistan and then, crucially, in Iraq.

On discovering that the country was badly broken, that the 'get rid of Al-Qaeda' imperative could not be guaranteed in even the short-term without a minimum of internal stability in Afghanistan, and that stability in turn could not be achieved without improving governance, decision-makers soon realised this had to be enabled through a comprehensive approach combining security with governance and economic development.

Thus, the initial kinetic counter-terrorism mission morphed into state-building and counter-narcotics, which found NATO forces in far-flung places like Helmand with no clear purpose and without the tools to defend themselves, let alone build a different state. To make matters worse, as the memory of 9/11 faded, the Taliban's traditional patron, Pakistan, reverted to playing both sides—the West and the Taliban—against each other, for reasons both of its own geopolitical and domestic insecurities and elite interests.

Figure 1

Data from 2001–2019 is from the Afghanistan Index, Brookings Institute, 2020. The above data is in terms of annual averages of US and international troop levels. 2020 and 2021 figures show troop numbers of the Resolute

Support Mission, which includes troops of NATO allies and partners as of February 2020 and 2021 respectively.

During a briefing with reporters in Kabul on 1 May 2003, Rumsfeld declared an end to ‘major combat’ in Afghanistan, the announcement coinciding with President George W. Bush’s ‘mission accomplished’ declaration of an end to fighting in Iraq.[15] At the time there were fewer than 20,000 international troops in Afghanistan. By 2011, there were over 130,000.

As violence ratcheted up, a vicious cycle kept the West engaged and simultaneously caused resentment and violence to rise. This prompted a surge in coalition troops from 2010 to enable a withdrawal of combat forces, followed by a further drawdown of advisers to the point that, by 2015, almost all the fighting was being done by the Afghans themselves. The military withdrawal was delinked from the security environment, yet it is best to try to negotiate a political deal from a position of military strength, not one of weakness. This is at best an ahistorical, at worst a careless interpretation of the politics and methods of peace-making, and of American policy in particular. It reflects a failure, from the outset, to think things through to the finish.

The absence of a strategy, and the failure to develop a cogent linkage between military outcomes and a political solution internally and regionally, are key lessons from other conflicts, notably the US experience in Vietnam. While the Vietnam parallel is resisted by many in the Afghan government, for reasons highlighted below, it reminds us of the primacy of politics in war, a lesson that should be noted by outsiders to any conflict.

* * *

Any visitor to Afghanistan during the war, and anyone (including both of us) who served as a military or civilian adviser in the field during the conflict, could not fail to be struck by the extraordinary commitment and competence of military commanders. Indeed, military forces were put into situations where they should never have been. This included regularly having, at least in the early days of the intervention, to use military tools and diplomatic initiatives to create political compromises among feuding

parties to bring them into the government tent, or at least prevent them acting openly as spoilers.

But this hard country was never going to be changed by a string of bright young Brigade and Battalion Commanders doing their best ('We're making progress, but challenges remain'…) in Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Uruzgan and dozens of other barren and hostile spots. The war was not inherently unwinnable, perhaps, but the missions these mostly very capable, brave and selfless men and women were sent on, within the resource and timeframe parameters they were given, were often unachievable. Like the highway to hell, the road to defeat in Afghanistan was paved with good intentions.

In Afghanistan, for all the organograms and rhetorical posturing, there was no integrated plan linking the military defeat of the insurgency with development and improved governance, and no cogent theory of victory explaining how this would ensure sufficiently enduring stability to allow the military to leave.

This was most notable in the confusion among strategic goals, which added to a general unwieldiness of operations. Rather than bringing order from chaos, on which success depended, this confusion often led to the reverse. While counterinsurgency theory holds that military tools are secondary and subordinate to civilian political, governance and development means, the subordination of capable military forces to civilian agencies was unachievable in practice in Afghanistan. This was due to a lack of civilian expertise, reluctance of aid organisations to integrate efforts with the military, endlessly rapid rotations, and civilian risk-aversion exacerbated by the underwhelming quality of some, though by no means all, the agencies involved.

There were strenuous—and, often, successful—attempts to improve the tactical performance of armies that were not, for the most part, designed, trained or equipped for the task they faced in Afghanistan. For all the puffing up of the relevance of Britain's experience in Northern Ireland, the intervening coalition in Afghanistan mostly comprised militaries focused on conventional warfare.

As fast as the painful lessons from Vietnam had been learnt, they had been unlearnt, ensuring only the most facile and superficial of comparisons. The extraordinarily steep learning curve of Afghanistan and Iraq hastened a revolution in counter-insurgency (COIN) thinking including, in the US, a

new field manual (FM 3–24) issued in 2006 and regularly updated since.[16] There was also a series of excellent field-driven analyses of the situation in Afghanistan, and its implications for tactical adaptation and operational reform.

Unfortunately, little of this thinking filtered through to the strategic level, where decision-makers tended to conflate the 'troop ceiling'—the authorised number of troops in country—with the overall strategy. It also proved extremely difficult to implement much of the elegant, but often impractical, theorising of COIN specialists (including ourselves) on the ground, under conditions of constant chaos, tight resource constraints and truncated timelines.

If the so-called 'COIN revolution' of 2005–2010 achieved anything useful in Afghanistan, it was primarily that it fostered a widespread recognition of the importance—emphasized in the theory and underlined by its failure in practice—of distinguishing, fundamentally, between direct and indirect approaches to solving conflict, and of working collaboratively with local actors.

There is no doubting that the military could not at times contain its own eagerness, for which senior officers and their political bosses could rightly be criticised and even condemned. What, for instance, were they thinking in going into Helmand Province, in what veteran journalist Sandy Gall describes as 'Tony Blair's twenty-first century adventure to pacify the drug-growing Afghan south'?[17] It amounted to, as Henry Worsley, a British soldier sent to reconnoitre the area in 2005, famously put it, 'A bit like moving another gang into the East End of London. [The Taliban] weren't going to like it.'[18] (Worsley, who moved freely around the province for weeks with just 15 soldiers, died in 2016 attempting the first solo, unaided crossing of Antarctica.)

As a consequence, when the political call was made to send a force 'to rebuild the country', planners scurried around to address Rudyard Kipling's Six Honest Men: *'What and Why and When, and How and Where and Who'*. Given that 'figures as to the cost, time and commitment did not exist,' retired UK Special Forces commander Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb recalls, 'you might call it anthropology by fire' where there was 'no great plan, no great test of fighting strength, of will or for some commercial take. It was just reconnaissance and [it] became, quickly, reconnaissance by fire.'[19] As another ISAF commander confirms: 'On Helmand it was the

military … who went out, did a study and suggested Dutch to Uruzgan, Canada to Kandahar and UK to Helmand—it sort of fitted with the UK's commitment to taking the lead on dealing with the narcotics production and trade, which proved to be an extremely unhelpful distraction. But it was also because no one did due diligence on how hard Helmand would be.'[20]

And so it proved to be. As Major General Andrew McKay, who commanded there in 2007, observed, the British went to Helmand 'with their eyes shut and fingers crossed'.[21] The Afghan government hardly helped, given President Karzai's continued support for the Governor of Helmand, local warlord Sher Mohammed Akhundzada. The latter was deeply involved in the narcotics trade and his longstanding corruption and abusive behaviour towards the local population created an opening for the Taliban—who had been fighting him since the 1990s—to build support within the community.

Ultimately some 800 NATO personnel died in Helmand, including 104 British soldiers in the town of Sangin alone, considered the epicentre of the fighting, which fell to the Taliban with barely a struggle in 2017 once NATO forces departed.

As *The Times* notes about the decision to go to the province, 'The charge sheet includes institutional arrogance and an over-keenness to deploy to Helmand to compensate for a troubled campaign in Iraq. In addition, there is evidence of another British intelligence failure, this time an underestimation of the threat rather than the overestimation that was made on weapons of mass destruction before the downfall of Saddam Hussein.'[22]

It attempted to destroy the little economy that existed, pushing the opium price up (and incentivising farmers to grow it) whilst at the same time generating anti-NATO sentiment. Eradication, in particular, was powerfully counter-productive in that troops and counter-narcotics police tended to eradicate poppy crops growing within the areas they could safely reach, which tended to be the areas occupied by populations under government authority. This meant that the pro-Kabul population (to the extent that any such population existed in the province) suffered most from the counter-narcotics agenda, while those living in areas under Taliban control were spared.

This, too, gave people an incentive to support the Taliban and oppose the government. In any case, the real money was not in opium but rather, as

noted above, in the logistics and construction contracts driven by the international presence. This remained true throughout the 'surge' period, even though drugs (at around $250 million internal value annually in Afghanistan) offered a nice supplement and became a core element of income for the Taliban and their support base.

The chaos of Helmand reflects another challenge. As Stuart Tootal, who commanded British paratroopers in the province, says, the military was 'not supported by the right resources and the right strategy.'[23] There was no single campaign plan. National agendas and competing commanders' egos continually led to dramatic changes in strategy, loss of focus, and a six-to-12-month cycle of reinventing the wheel.

This undermined the power of the first impression, at which one only ever gets one chance. Western forces were welcomed in 2001, but when they did not follow through with greater numbers and commitment (because Iraq went worse and took longer than planned, forcing Afghanistan even lower down the list of international priorities), they lost trust and credibility with Afghans who realised the Taliban would endure while NATO was unable and unwilling to protect them in perpetuity.

In this, the Bush administration appeared not to appreciate that the Taliban constituted a significant part of Afghan society, 'legitimized by faith, ethnicity, and their fighting during the anti-Soviet war'.[24] This lack of comprehension was worsened by a Western naïveté, simplicity even, in damning all Taliban as 'evil-doers' who were bad and should be attacked, just as Baathists were demonised in post-Saddam Iraq. This belief had its first and most consequential impact in December 2001 when Donald Rumsfeld and other US political leaders contemptuously rejected a proposal by Hamid Karzai to permit Mullah Omar and other former government leaders to live in dignity following peace negotiations with the defeated Taliban. This failure to allow the Taliban a seat at the negotiating table in 2001 was a serious missed opportunity, or the war's 'original sin' as the former UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan Lakdhar Brahimi called it.[25]

'The answer is no,' Rumsfeld stated flatly in response to Karzai's proposed peace negotiation, while White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said that 'those who harbour terrorists need to be brought to justice,' adding that he included Mullah Omar as one of them.[26]

In effect, the Bush administration's failure even to bother negotiating a semblance of a peace deal with the defeated Taliban—at a time when any

such negotiations would have been conducted from a position of enormous strength, with extremely powerful leverage over the outcome—condemned the coalition to two decades of trying to rediscover that leverage, so that they could again create the conditions to negotiate a settlement from the position of strength they had been handed on a platter by Karzai less than two months into the war.

Rumsfeld, like many, misunderstood the Taliban as exporters of extremism, whereas in fact they had, first and foremost, an internal nationalist agenda, married to a vigilante law-and-order approach to the rule of law. Rumsfeld's misunderstanding led him to pursue the military annihilation of the Taliban until, bored by the gritty demands of stabilisation and reconstruction and distracted by the shiny object of Saddam Hussein, he wandered off to Iraq.

But military objectives could never be an end in themselves, only a platform for a political solution. Defeating the enemy should have been the starting point and base from which all the complexities of rebuilding a nation could begin. Instead, it was too often seen as the end state. And, obviously military forces were not the best choice to deliver development assistance, even though the security circumstances demanded they had to be. Their civilian counterparts were, however, considerably worse. Aid agencies and NGOs attempted to transform the Afghan economy, ensuring that it was less 'extractive' and more 'inclusive', but were continuously hampered by a lack of understanding and a lack of patience.

As Fink Haysom (a former advisor to President Nelson Mandela who served as Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Afghanistan between 2012 and 2016, and subsequently in Somalia and South Sudan) puts it, peacebuilding strategies have tended to follow a formula based on the adoption of an agreed constitution along with the establishment of rule of law and necessary institutions.

The World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report*, 'Conflict, Security, and Development', reflected this traditional formula, arguing that first, institutional legitimacy is the key to stability, in protecting citizens, guarding against corruption, providing access to justice, and providing job opportunities through markets. Second, investing in citizen security, justice, and jobs is central to reducing violence. Third, this demands a layered approach, including at the national and regional level.[27]

This process of rebuilding after conflict can take at least as long as the period of decline. As Haysom points out, institution-building after a civil war can typically take as long as twenty years, with the rule of law perhaps twice as long in order to build up the necessary culture and respect. This traditional approach has been made more complex, and confused, by the insertion of new agendas into the mix and by the rise of new international actors, including Qatar, UAE, Turkey, and Iran, along with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and others.

Too often the donors came armed, and armed too with the wrong questions, if at all, and too ready with answers.

* * *

The weaknesses typified by external interveners in Afghanistan after 9/11—unclear war aims, uncertain objectives, heavily-armed ignorance, arrogance and impatience—were compounded, in the view of some leading Afghans, by problems within their own government. Former First Vice-President of Afghanistan Amrullah Saleh observes that 'the issue was that President [Hamid] Karzai, a great orator and communicator, was not a system builder. And the US did not work truly with the Afghan government' as a result, only partially so. 'They either thought we were too small, or too incompetent, or they lacked a vision.'[28]

At its core, the international community failed, until too late in the day, to understand the political character of Afghanistan's conflict. The mood of vengeance in the US after 9/11 meant that American decisionmakers were not minded to make peace with the Taliban, or to bring about an inclusive settlement. As noted earlier, the Bush administration did not bother even to negotiate peace with the Taliban in 2001, as if once defeated they (and the tendency within Afghan society that they represented) had simply ceased to exist.

Rufus Phillips, a US Army and, later, CIA Vietnam hand, described the difference between American views and local aspirations as a 'fog of incomprehension'. This observation applies equally to Afghanistan, not least in identifying a political cause other than the removal of the Taliban that the Afghans could agree to and Americans believed were worth fighting for.[29]

In Afghanistan, outsiders often failed to grasp the Afghan ability to cut deals in ways that allowed them to compete for power and yet co-operate to make money at the same time. These failures reflected a lack of understanding of the Taliban and of Afghans, coupled with a tendency to caricature them, a consequence of poor planning, ignorance and impatience.

Just as the US failed to build a South Vietnamese national cause equal to that of the North, the international community has failed to do so in Afghanistan. In particular, the tendency of successive American administrations to telegraph their impatience and desire to leave resulted in a failure to find long-term solutions and encouraged shortcuts and half measures.

The Taliban calculus—the determination simply to wait us out—might have changed if the West had signalled that it was in Afghanistan for the long haul, as it had been in Korea. Taliban leaders would have been more likely to commit to a political solution if faced with the prospect of a permanent military stalemate. Instead, they exploited Western impatience, talking while fighting until they were able to launch their final campaign for a decisive victory.

In his defence, we should note that Ghani made several peace overtures towards the Taliban. Starting in February 2018, he offered recognition to the Taliban as a political party, release of prisoners, an end to sanctions, the issuing of passports to their leaders to end the travel ban, and a ceasefire.

In June the same year he proposed a three-day Eid ceasefire, which the Taliban accepted, though a proposed extension was turned down. He tried again in August, suggesting a three-month extension, but the Taliban declined, apparently concerned about the effects it would have on the battle-readiness of their fighters.

But Ghani's combative personality made it impossible for him to build the political alliances with other Afghan leaders that would have been required for a successful peacebuilding effort, while the Taliban leaders knew they had only to wait out the Americans. Time plays in favour of the weaker party in asymmetrical conflict.

Once the Trump administration had negotiated its separate peace with the Taliban in Doha in February 2020, the international military presence in Afghanistan was no longer conditions-based but held hostage to an arbitrary timeline. In any case, an indigenous Afghan-led peace process was

probably impossible to achieve, let alone to make stick against three competing realities.

The first was the role of Pakistan. The coalition's dependency on supply routes through that country, coupled with a fear of things falling apart in a nuclear-armed state, meant the Pakistani government could withstand any amount of international pressure. Indeed, Islamabad possessed (and was not afraid to use) its strategic leverage to reduce that pressure.

The second reality undermining any potential for an indigenous Afghanled peace process was the tension between the centralising ambitions of the Kabul government and the fragmentary tendencies in Afghanistan's ethno-linguistic, geographical and economic make-up. Ghani, like Karzai before him, was fascinated with the notion of strong central government: in part as a mechanism for governance and control, in part as the centre of a lucrative patronage system, and in part as an antidote to the centrifugal effects of warlord rule.

Ghani referred often to the state structure created by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901) and continued by twentieth-century strongmen such as Mohammed Daoud Khan, who ruled from 1953 until 1963 as Prime Minister under his cousin King Zahir Shah, before overthrowing the monarchy and becoming president until his assassination in 1978.

Paradoxically, the traditional centralised system of Abdul Rahman and Daoud Khan was wholly unsuited, and never intended, to provide public goods and governance across Afghanistan's difficult geography. But in post-Bonn Afghanistan, a Eurocentric governance model—of the sort favoured by World Bank officials like Ashraf Ghani—was seen as essential if Afghanistan was to become a modern functioning state, and such a state had many more demands and obligations upon it than the traditional Afghan one.

Even in his last month before fleeing Kabul, questioned about the centralising tendency of his government, Ghani argued that the solution lay in 'the economy, not in politics'. He contended, 'Political devolution is easier in a country which is economically knitted together. If the central government is considered just, the demands for devotion decline.' He noted that ministries had proved to be 'misaligned' and 'siloed', requiring 'integration of the state through digitisation.'[30] Ahmad Massoud, by comparison, felt that 'the North has been ignored and not truly represented'.

He said that only ‘decentralisation would change Afghanistan and stop the Taliban’.[31]

The third factor was, without doubt, the time-limited nature of the international commitment. Afghanistan’s political elite saw the war as a duty of the international community while they feasted on the booty of aid, seemingly oblivious to the existential threat to the status quo posed by the sell-by date of foreign partners. At the same time, the Taliban were alive to this deadline, particularly during the surge period of 2010–2014.

The West failed to appreciate the extent to which Afghanistan’s politics were personal and tribal rather than national, and the degree to which regional influences matter. This does not diminish the responsibility of Afghans (particularly Afghan elites) for their own misfortune, nor does it excuse Washington’s preference for ignoring the obvious political frailties as it sought to paper together a fractious Afghan system without a peace settlement.

As Afghanistan specialist Barnett Rubin argues, ‘No matter how many troops the US sent, no matter how much money the US spent, Afghanistan would remain Afghanistan and not another country. Without addressing the political issues that caused the conflict, the US was just postponing the day when the whole enterprise would collapse like the Ponzi scheme it was.’[32]

Fundamentally, the international community was attempting to change the poorest country in Asia by inserting into it money, troops, skills and training, and by modelling and building national institutions, much as they had tried to do in another era in Southeast Asia, and also failed.

Confusion, Compression and Echoes of the Past

President Lyndon B. Johnson remarked that ‘no president ever had a problem of doing what is right, the big problem is knowing what is right’.[33] Nowhere is this maxim truer than amidst the confusion and compression of conflict.

Countering insurgencies follows a tried and tested formula—but one that is extraordinarily difficult to execute, especially when operating in someone else’s country. It involves a military dimension to keep the enemy under pressure and separate them from the population; the stabilisation of economic, governance and social systems to bring or keep the population onside; the development of public safety and rule-of-law systems to prevent

the enemy intimidating and terrorising the population; and, finally and most importantly, the search for a political settlement to remove the enemy's reasons for fighting.

As General Maxwell Taylor, US Ambassador to South Vietnam under Johnson, observed of these components: 'All parts of it are interrelated; all parts are indispensable; we must be successful on all fronts.'[34] The problem is that those who conduct counter-insurgency campaigns seldom are. Military force in this context often proves to be counter-productive beyond a certain, fairly low, threshold of violence.

While COIN is population-centric and military forces are often the only actors capable of operating effectively under insurgent threat, the military component always runs the risk of alienating civilian support. Likewise, the economic component is usually fragmented, and highly topical, in part since military units are not equipped for economic development, yet their civilian counterparts are often either overly risk-averse or antagonistic towards business.

The security, economic and governance components of counter-insurgency are meaningless in themselves, unless they are linked to solving what is essentially a political problem. Popular support is seen as critical, because only with voluntary backing from the population can the insurgents successfully be separated from their base. To win this support, ensuring the legitimacy of the government, fighting the 'other war' of reconstruction and development is deemed essential. The French in Indochina described this side of the campaign as 'pacification'. The Americans, drawing on a British phrase from the Malayan Emergency, called it a war for 'hearts and minds' while the South Vietnamese government chose the term 'rural reconstruction'. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who followed Taylor as US ambassador in Saigon for two years from 1965, preferred the term 'revolutionary development' and promoted the development of 'revolutionary development cadres' and 'armed propaganda teams' as a way of directly competing with the Viet Cong for control over the population.[35]

Whatever it was called, the components of this approach involved, first and foremost, the provision of order and safety to protect those who co-operated with the government—a process in which local forces were expected to increasingly take the lead. As President Kennedy warned in his last public words on Vietnam, 'In the final analysis, it is their war. They are

the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them…but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam.'

Civilian agencies would be integrated with the military effort, providing carefully coordinated social services, including education, potable water and healthcare to villages under protection. In Vietnam, under Lodge and his tenacious subordinate Bob Komer, this effort was integrated under the umbrella of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), in which diplomats, military officers and USAID and US Information Agency specialists worked side by side. In Afghanistan, diplomats and development specialists were deployed through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and Regional Platforms that worked alongside military combat units, but there was only a limited degree of integration with military forces at the tactical level.

To those with experience of Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention Mali and Somalia, the elements and language of the past will seem uncannily familiar. In Vietnam, American units were to 'search and destroy', by which units would 'find, fix in place, fight and destroy enemy bases'. Next the area would be 'cleared' of guerrillas who remained behind. Finally, the area would be 'secured' to provide a stable environment for locals to live their lives.

In Afghanistan, ISAF's counter-insurgency strategy, was summed up as: 'Shape' (shaping public opinion and targeting Taliban leadership through mainly Special Forces' activity); 'Clear' (the insurgent through military means primarily—or, if the Shape has been well handled, this could become the 'Steal', where troops take the ground virtually uncontested); 'Hold' (the security situation); and 'Build' (the economy and political reconciliation).

Partnership with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was seen as crucial throughout these stages, described in terms of its intended effect in separating insurgents from the civilian population in the diagram below.[36] In nearly every counter-insurgency campaign, it's the last bit—the 'Build'—that no one has yet got right in a post-conflict environment, whether it be in Africa, Afghanistan or elsewhere. The practice has not matched advances in the theory, even though lessons have been distilled *ad nauseam*.[37]

The problems seem similar too. A lack of troops in Vietnam meant that the US focus was inevitably on searching and destroying rather than clearing and securing. American forces in Vietnam faced an intractable

challenge of timing and commitment. Locals can afford a protracted war; outsiders don't have that degree of patience. They want to go home, usually as soon as possible. Likewise, in Vietnam the administration of aid dollars was so lax that South Vietnamese officials had little trouble taking a piece of the action. Legendary levels of elite corruption in Saigon exacerbated problems of legitimacy. Phantom soldiers on the personnel rolls in Vietnam bloated pay packets, the surplus then collected by commanders, just as positions were sold in Afghanistan and rents then collected. Items meant for hospitals and villages in South Vietnam found their way into markets and homes. Bridges were blown up and rebuilt, with fat reconstruction contracts given to those connected to the demolition team.

'The Americans, often petty power-brokers, heady with the glory of "running a province" (or district), tended to shrug off corruption endemic in a local elite enriched by a wartime economy bloated on American dollars.'[38] This sounds like Afghanistan, but it is Vietnam in the 1960s. There is a big difference between these wars at least in theory. Afghanistan was an insurgency against a client government installed by an invading, occupying force in a country where governance had been eroded by two decades of civil war before 2001. Vietnam's conflict involved a nationalist struggle intent on completing the decolonization process and unifying the country. Regardless, the imperative to find a political solution and integrate security and development responses to this end remain the same.

Whatever the applicability of the analogy it is far from certain, twenty years after 9/11, whether the US, NATO, and the other allies and coalition partners will learn and internalise the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan or will simply seek to put their painful experiences behind them and move on, just as the US military did after Vietnam.

* * *

Bernard Fall was an unusual breed. A Jewish-Austrian refugee from Hitler's Germany who became a French resistance fighter, went to America, obtained a doctorate in political science, wrote six books, taught at Howard University and spent much of his life in the field. Part soldier, part journalist, part academic, he was famous for digging out facts through fieldwork rather than pontificating from the safety of his sitting-room, office or college library.

As one might expect of such a character, he was willing to swim against the stream of prevailing opinion, such as over the war in Vietnam where he warned that America, like France before her, was losing. His message, conveyed in his seminal *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, was that states lose irregular wars because of a failure to grasp the mentality of the people they are trying to help. Thinking and believing otherwise reflects incomplete ground-level intelligence. This lends itself to 'abstractions that obscured the cultural reality on the ground'.[39]

A further Vietnam echo was in the method and consequences of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. If Washington wanted to leave, that choice had to be grudgingly accepted by Afghans, but not the manner of its departure. The West's attempt to escape its moral obligation to the people of that country will have consequences, not least for the credibility of its promises, and certainly for the millions of women now at the mercy of the Taliban.

As in Vietnam, the US negotiated a peace in Afghanistan to enable retreat, not victory. In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, a failure to understand their allies, the enemy, or the character of the war in which they were engaged took American soldiers and politicians down the wrong road. In both wars, nations fundamentally got the politics wrong: whatever the failures of counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism, the problem was not that Western armed forces lacked the ability to defeat the enemy militarily. On the contrary, during the twenty years of fighting, the Taliban were defeated on the battlefield many times over.

Rather, the problem was that the politicians, along with the Afghan political leaders put in place by the international community, lacked the ability to translate that battlefield success into enduring and acceptable political outcomes.

Bernard Fall died on 21 February 1967, after stepping on a landmine near Hue City while on patrol with US Marines. He was just forty years old. Viewed with hindsight, his insights are remarkable and ring even truer today. Externally-directed strategies for recovery, reconstruction and stabilisation need to be more consultative than prescriptive, they need to be organic rather than based on a template, political not technical, less quantitative than qualitative, and strategically intentioned rather than simply tactically focused.

Steadfast honesty, studied informality, a driven sense of purpose and the willingness to make huge personal sacrifices and commit incredible energy and effort in the pursuit of these goals are all imperative for success—which is one reason why success in this kind of conflict is so rare.

'Politics cannot be separated from war, nor war from politics,' writes Fredrik Logevall.[40] His reflection on Fall's contribution to the conflict in Vietnam has resonance in other, so-called limited wars. 'Political considerations do not cease abruptly with the onset of war, and military considerations can never be far from the politician's mind, even in times of peace.'

A Question of Politics

'Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable, the art of the next best', Otto von Bismarck once said. The Prussian statesman was explaining *realpolitik*, a philosophy of political pragmatism over ideological goals. Put differently, if you don't compromise and reconcile competing interests and objectives with the resources of time, skills and money, you could end up with nothing.

A truly sustainable peace would almost certainly involve compromises that conclude with the various parties getting some but not all of what they want; where everyone is a little bit happy (or equally unhappy) with the outcome. But the idea of compromise was rarely applied to the twenty-first century Afghan mission. Though there were compromises made in the inputs of resources and patience, America and its allies did not get what they wanted, not even in their chaotic exit from the conflict.

The inconsistencies and lack of strategic clarity that blighted the effort could be seen at each stage of the war, where force numbers and ambitions varied considerably as political pressures came and went. In *The Long War*, David Loyn suggests several phases to the international mission: 'Not Building a Nation' (2001–2006); 'The Taliban Return' (2006–2009); 'The Surge' (2009–2011); 'Drawdown' (2011–2014) and 'Endgame' (2015–2021).[41]

Not accepting the Taliban's surrender in 2001, along with not bothering to negotiate a peace settlement including them at the Bonn Conference at the end of that year were serious missed opportunities.[*] As it became apparent how complex the nation-building and peace-making project in

Afghanistan was, the character of the war changed from expansion of the NATO footprint (till 2009) to securing the conditions necessary for peace, or at least an honourable exit (from 2009 onwards). At the very least, success required putting in enough troops to stabilise the situation, and sufficient resources to enable the basic functions of the state, including essential services and the rule of law.

In the process, there was a failure to distinguish wishful thinking from rational analysis. 'This is how wars end in the twenty-first century' said President Barack Obama in the White House's Rose Garden in 2014, 'not through signing ceremonies but through decisive blows against our adversaries, transitions to elected governments, security forces who take the lead and ultimately full responsibility.' While Obama admitted that 'we have to recognize that Afghanistan will not be a perfect place, and it is not America's responsibility to make it one', as Amy Davidson Sorkin notes, 'that actually seems like a good description of how wars—or at least America's wars—*continue* in the twenty-first century, not how they end.'[42]

This highlights a further lesson from Afghanistan: don't attempt war on the cheap, as you invariably pay more in the long run than if you had allocated sufficient resources from the outset. As General Stanley McChrystal reflected in his memoir *My Share of the Task*, the Afghan mission received only 17,000 of the 30,000 extra troops requested of the Obama administration by his predecessor, General David McKiernan.

'Military leaders, many of whom were students of counter-insurgency, recognised the dangers of an incremental escalation, and the historical lesson that 'trailing' an insurgency typically condemned counter-insurgents to failure.'[43] This short-termism meant, simply, that the US and its allies would spend two decades and billions of dollars in Afghanistan while consigning all their efforts and sacrifices to defeat.

A lesson from the Soviet years that should have dampened early exuberance was that winning tactical engagements was never a problem in Afghanistan, especially when airpower could be brought to bear. Holding ground was far harder, as America and its allies were to discover well before the Afghan collapse, when American forces gradually withdrew from rural outposts, conceding them to the Taliban, just as they had done in Vietnam. This was a lesson, too, learnt by others in Afghanistan.

* * *

* Once the Taliban had been toppled, attention shifted to forming an Afghan government. Instigated by America's Secretary of State Colin Powell at the behest of President George W. Bush, and chaired by Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, a conference of Afghan leaders was held over nine days in Bonn in Germany at the end of 2001 to select the leader of an Afghan Interim Authority. Concluding on 5 December 2001, the 23 Afghan signatories at the Bonn Conference chose Hamid Karzai as the 'chairman' to head a 30-strong cabinet. He was sworn in on 22 December having survived a friendly-fire missile attack in southern Afghanistan two weeks earlier. His appointed as President for two years was made by a Loya Jirga 'Grand Assembly' which was convened in Kabul in June 2002. He was elected for the first of two five-year terms in October 2004 elections. Although intended as the first step toward a broadbased government representing the range of Afghanistan's ethnic groups and regions, the exclusion of the Taliban from Bonn seeded the next phase of the conflict.

2

ECHOES OF CAMPAIGNS PAST

Down from the heights which once we commanded,
With burning feet we descend to the ground.
Bombarded with calumny, slander and lies,
We're leaving, we're leaving, we're leaving.

Farewell, you mountains, you know best
What men we were in that distant land;
Now judge us fairly for what we did,
You chair-bound critics who stayed at home.

Farewell, bright world, Afghanistan,
Perhaps we should forget you now.
But sadness grips us as we go:
We're leaving, we're leaving, we're leaving.

Farewell, you mountains, you know best
Where lies our glory, where our pain.
O Mighty Land for which we fought,
Can you now dry our mothers' tears?

Farewell, you mountains, you know best
The price we paid while we were here,
What foes unconquered still survive;
What friends we had to leave behind.

Igor Morozov, ‘We’re Leaving’[1]

On 15 February 1989, Colonel-General Boris Gromov,[2] commander of the Soviet 40th Army, walked across the Friendship Bridge spanning the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in front of a global television audience. Gromov was the last Russian to leave Afghanistan after a decade-long intervention, one that had cost the lives of at least 15,000 Soviet soldiers, with a further 35,000 wounded, and perhaps as many as half a million Afghans.[3]

The Soviets’ strategy to subdue the mujahideen and support their Communist allies in Kabul replicated, in many respects, that of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) a decade later: an initial military intervention backed by aid to a local partner, complemented by periodic troop surges, then a gradual drawdown. Though the geopolitics were different—and though the Soviets were supporting an existing socialist regime rather than, like the US-led coalition after 2001, propping up a government they had installed themselves through military conquest—the results of both interventions were largely the same.

This was perhaps inevitable in a country where both the Soviets and the West were unwelcome infidels, the rural population proved to be impossible to control, the resistance showed impressive resilience and fighting capacity, and where, ultimately, the foreigners eventually had to give way to a combination of regional interests and unbreakable, intertwined bonds of religion, tribe, honour and revenge. Yet Western leaders after 9/11 convinced themselves of the superiority of their cause, their technology and their strategy, believing that this time—with the ‘international community’ dominated by a US-led Western alliance at the apogee of its post-Cold War powers—things would be different.

Tony Blair epitomises this view. The former British prime minister has (unsurprisingly) defended the decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan in 2001. In a typical rhetorical flourish, he writes, ‘We held out the prospect, backed by substantial commitment, of turning Afghanistan from a failed terror state into a functioning democracy on the mend. It may have been a misplaced ambition, but it was not an ignoble one.’

Blair admits that ‘we made mistakes, some serious. But,’ he argues, ‘the reaction to our mistakes has been, unfortunately, further mistakes.’ And yet

‘we shouldn’t dupe ourselves into thinking it was ever going to be anything other than tough, when there was an internal insurgency combining with external support—in this case, Pakistan—to destabilise the country and thwart its progress.’ Blair observes that, ‘[W]e are in a mood that seems to regard the bringing of democracy as a utopian delusion and intervention, virtually of any sort, as a fool’s errand.’[4] Blair’s plaintive defence reveals a profound lack of understanding about the history of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, especially the recent Soviet experience.

Over centuries, Afghanistan’s cycle of war and of political and economic collapse created what Barnett Rubin has described as a ‘pattern of regional economic activity and associated social and political networks that compete with and undermine legal economies and states’.[5] From the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 until their triumphant return in August 2021, the drivers behind this cycle—conflict, corruption, the absence of rule of law, poor governance and abuse of the population by politically-connected elites—were undiminished.

Kabul suffered a government routinely described as corrupt and inept; one that ‘failed to build a stable and viable country despite the loss of thousands of lives and billions of dollars of assistance’.[6] The distributive and extractive patronage networks that linked central and regional government with local power brokers joined mujahideen connections to business interests. Elite predation operated through local power centres was expedited by a combination of patronage, opaque governance, lack of foreign political will and seemingly inexhaustible flows of foreign financing.

Mistakes were not an Afghan preserve. Many were made by the international community, though few leaders, whether civilian or military, have been willing to admit them. And these errors were committed not only in Afghanistan: the terms of failure are routine in foreign missions worldwide, highlighting how difficult it is to change local traditions and operating systems, which are there for good reason, while maintaining local leadership and ownership.

The Afghan elite has long been reliant on rent-based incomes, whether from aid or natural resources. During the 1950s, Rubin reminds us, ‘urban society depended on state redistribution. After the introduction of a stateled development model [the] private sector was largely connected to trade, and the government controlled most urban employment.’[7] This is a system

described succinctly by one veteran Kabul politician in 2012 as 'predatory and fragmented', very different from the immediate post-Soviet era in that 'it is more corrupt and there is little of the state capacity there was then'.[8]

During the Soviet occupation, new trends emerged, including increasing dependence on aid for maintaining allegiances, for subsistence (especially given the levels of rural destruction) and through redistribution in cities swelled by displaced rural people. During this time, 'the main economic actors were the commanders, a group mostly drawn from new elites that benefited from US, Pakistani and Saudi policies of supporting only Islamist parties rather than the nationalist former rulers.' Come the 1989 Soviet withdrawal, 'commanders pursued economic strategies to increase their power, wealth and autonomy, establishing bazaars and providing local security to traders in return for tribute,' Rubin wrote.

During the early 1990s, the drop-off in aid from traditional donors and falling income from natural resources elevated the importance of humanitarian agencies for food aid, while the post-Soviet, pre-Taliban government focused on printing money as its principal source both of expenditure and income. The advent of the Taliban saw, as Rubin puts it, a 'transition from localised predatory *warlordism* to weak *rentier-state* power based on a criminalised open economy'.

Traders required, and the government profited from, the suppression of predation. It is estimated that the Taliban derived at least $75 million in 1997 from taxing Afghanistan-Pakistan transit trade. Rubin notes that the rest of such an economy 'is hardly productive enough to recover the cost of governing it… Most of the population was left to fend for themselves, arguably in conditions of greater security, but without a development agenda, or public services, and with a negative agenda in terms of the status of women.'[9]

Karzai had been a compromise candidate in the Bonn Conference leadership selection, but was acceptable precisely because it was believed he had limited power and would not challenge the regional commanders—otherwise known as warlords—who had emerged from the post-Soviet chaos to help in the overthrow of the Taliban, and were now kingmakers.

To make government work, Karzai's lack of a personal support base meant that he had to make deals, and the only benefit he could offer potential allies for their cooperation was access to government positions or control of key state functions that brought with them the prospect of

patronage and income. Whatever his motivations—and they seem to have been relatively pure, at least at the outset—this pattern of trading patronage for power eventually came to dominate virtually every aspect of Karzai's government from the central to the local level.

More than anything, the difficulties of reforming Afghanistan politically and economically reflect the character of its own society, where prosperity rests on political foundations, power is not only centralised but inclusive in its outlook, and investors can be assured their successes will not be plundered. It is only in the interests of the elite to cede power to inclusive institutions when confronted by something worse, such as the prospect of revolution.

In other words, the foundations of prosperity are political struggle against domination by an entrenched, exclusive elite. If institutions of power enable the elite to serve its own interests—what are termed extractive institutions—these interests will collide with those of the people at large. Poverty is a choice made by leadership, not through ignorance, but as a rational decision. As Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson argue, for those intent on keeping a grip on power and privilege, reforms are preferably piecemeal, since it 'makes sense to give in to a small demand rather than create a major showdown'.[10]

Déjà vu All Over Again?

As noted (but often forgotten), unlike the invasion after 9/11, which overthrew and replaced a government, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 was in support of an existing and relatively well functioning regime. But the Soviet task proved little easier given the chaos and factionalism of Afghan politics, the consistent interests of the Pakistani government in ensuring Afghan weakness and pliancy, and the opportunities for strategic mischief produced by the Cold War.

The Russians were hardly keen at first. The military museum of Herat possessed a diorama depicting the March 1979 uprising of Afghan government troops against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) in protest against reforms of the socialist government, which were portrayed as anti-Islamic. As many as 25,000 civilians and numerous Soviet advisers and their families died in the event and the brutal suppression that followed (and which left much of the city in ruins).

DRA President Nur Muhammad Taraki requested Soviet military assistance, complaining that he could no longer rely on the Afghan armed forces. Moscow, however, rejected Taraki's requests in line with its policy of non-intervention. When Taraki visited Moscow on 20 March 1979, Politburo member Alexei Kosygin explained that 'we carefully studied all aspects of this action and came to the conclusion that if our troops were introduced, the situation in your country would not only not improve but would worsen. One cannot deny that our troops would have to fight not only with foreign aggressors, but also with a certain number of your people. And people do not forgive such things.'[11]

Hardliners in Moscow pressed successfully later that year for military action in Afghanistan, arguing that a radical Islamist regime in Kabul would destabilise a Soviet-run Central Asia. The Chief of the Red Army General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, reportedly warned about the possibility of protracted guerrilla war.[12] However, his concerns were dismissed by a troika (comprising Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, KGB chairman Yuri Andropov and Defence Minister Marshal Dmitry Ustinov), who argued that the operation and occupation would be short and sharp, replacing the unpopular regime of Hafizullah Amin (who had violently deposed Nur Mohammad Taraki in September 1979) with the Soviet loyalist Babrak Karmal.

The reasons for intervention were, in the troika's minds, clear. America was fomenting instability through its ally Pakistan, while Amin's chaotic and brutal revolutionary administration had lost credibility and support among most of the Afghan population, compounded by the public's perception that the DRA was anti-Islamic. The Politburo believed that without an intervention, Amin's government would be 'lost' to a hostile regime.[13]

Fears of complete collapse had been heightened by the Herat uprising and, fearing that Amin was planning to switch sides to the US, the Soviets deployed the 40th Army across the border on 24 December 1979. *Operation Storm-333* deposed Amin and installed Karmal as the General Secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, where he lasted seven years.[14]

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan has been portrayed as Russia's Vietnam. There were acute differences, however, between the two

campaigns. In Vietnam, American military strength topped 550,000 troops at the peak of the war. By comparison, in Afghanistan, a region five times the size of Vietnam, Soviet strength varied between 90,000 and 104,000 troops. As Lester Grau noted, the Soviet 40th Army's five divisions, four separate brigades and four separate regiments, and a suite of support units, were hard pressed to provide security for 21 provincial centres, let alone extend this to the thousands of villages, hundreds of miles of communications routes, and 'key terrain features that punctuated and spanned that vast region'.

Soviet dead and missing in Afghanistan amounted to 15,000 troops, a modest percentage of the 642,000 Soviets who served during the ten-year war. More telling were the 469,685 casualties—nearly three-quarters of the overall force. More notable still were the vast numbers of troops who fell victim to disease (415,932), of which 115,308 suffered infectious hepatitis and 31,080 typhoid, giving an insight into the notoriously poor living and working conditions of the Soviet Army.[15]

The contemporary parallels from the Soviet experience, pre- and post-withdrawal, illustrate the difficulty, first, in modernising Afghanistan and, second, in managing retreat. As Sir Rodric Braithwaite reminds us, 'The intentions of the Soviet government [in 1979] were modest: they aimed to secure the main towns and the roads, stabilise the government, train up the Afghan army and police, and withdraw within six months or a year. Instead, they found themselves in a bloody war from which it took them nine years and fifty-two days to extricate themselves.'[16] There are a host of reasons for this.

They include a lack of national coherence and discipline among Afghan partners in a deeply divided society ruled by 'fierce pride, martial valour, honour and hospitality, mediated by the institution of the blood feud',[17] where there is a related lack of interest in building up a political and economic system responsive to long-term *national* needs and desires. Aid was inserted into this environment, given for ideological reasons rather than based on need. It was aimed at buying off the population rather than developing the economy.

To cap it all, regional countries were ill-disposed, if not actively opposed, to helping any nation-building process. All this was compounded by the ruinous social, political and developmental effects of a decade of war. And as Braithwaite notes presciently about the Soviets, 'Their

decisions were bedevilled by ignorance, ideological prejudice, muddled thinking, inadequate intelligence, divided counsel, and the sheer pressure of events.' Does this sound familiar?

The role of external actors was crucial, especially that of Pakistan as the principal base for the mujahideen and of the US and Saudi Arabia as the main sponsors. Washington's support for the mujahideen had begun even before the Soviet invasion. In March 1979, the US Department of Defense asked if there was value in keeping the Afghan insurgency going, 'sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire?' Walter Slocombe, the Defense official, explained, 'Well, the whole idea was that if the Soviets decided to strike at this tar baby, we had every interest in making sure that they got stuck.' In May 1979, US officials began secretly meeting with mujahideen leaders through the Pakistani government, and shortly thereafter President Jimmy Carter signed an authorisation for 'non-lethal' aid to the rebels.[18]

At the start, funding trickled in to support humanitarian supplies and antiquated Lee-Enfield rifles. By the end of the war, with advocacy from an unusual alliance comprising Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq working with Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson and a host of non-government actors, social figures and activists, the supply line had been widened to include Stinger missiles (of which 2,300 were eventually supplied to the mujahideen) along with a variety of sophisticated materiel. In total, covert funding to the mujahideen under the CIA's *Operation Cyclone* topped somewhere between $6 billion and $12 billion, split 50:50 between the US and Saudi governments.[19]

The collapse and failure of the Soviet incursion in Afghanistan was not solely due to American military assistance, no matter how difficult this made their military campaign. Nor was the demise of the DRA government solely due to the cutting off of Soviet aid in the early 1990s, though this undoubtedly hastened its demise. Moreover, the crude media caricature of the Soviets' Afghan strategy as one that was cack-handed and military-centric overlooks both the levels of commitment, relative sophistication and diversity inherent in the Russian-led approach.

Working with their Afghan allies, the Soviets evolved 'a military strategy focused on controlling cities, securing major roads, and rapidly training and equipping Afghan forces'. They also 'used a transition plan that combined timelines and the phased *Afghanisation* of the war', along with national economic reform, dialogue and reconciliation processes,

while mounting an aggressive international diplomatic campaign to expedite a ceasefire and the withdrawal.[20]

Each year from when Mikhail Gorbachev took over in March 1985, until their eventual withdrawal in 1989, the Soviets were both more flexible and more strident in developing a 'comprehensive' approach. The new Soviet premier conducted his own surge, increasing the strength of the 40th Army by 26,000 soldiers to 108,000, securing population centres and lines of communication and conducting aggressive military operations. In 1986, 1,868 Soviet soldiers were killed and 1,552 were wounded, while 3,690 Afghans were killed and 8,898 wounded. At the same time, the Soviets increased training and equipping for the Afghan military as it expanded to 252,900 troops and increased its aid to the DRA by 40% to over $600 million.

Although this combination of aid, local forces and Soviet military strength came close to defeating the mujahideen, it was hampered by the poor performance of the Afghan army and their political masters. Soviet advisers criticised their Afghan allies for their 'poor shooting skills and discipline, weak command and control, and failure to care for equipment'. Frustrated, Gorbachev advised Karmal to 'widen your social base. Pursue a dialogue with the tribes. Try to get support of the clergy. Give up on the leftist bent in economics. Learn to organise support of the private sector.'[21]

By May 1986, Karmal was gone, replaced by Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai, head of the feared KhAD secret police. At the same time, the Soviets accelerated their efforts to Afghanise the war, handing over much of the responsibility for combat operations to the DRA, while maintaining combat support through artillery, aviation and engineers, dividing 1,800 Soviet advisers among Afghan army units.

Aid increased by 12% during 1985. The DRA also began payments to militias in exchange for ceasefires, with 65,000 joining the payroll that year. Yet the human cost of the war remained high: 1,333 Soviet soldiers were killed in action and 1,552 wounded that year, while DRA losses increased significantly to 5,772 killed and 11,876 wounded.

Trying Everything

By 1987, Gorbachev had shifted focus to pursuing an international diplomatic solution, while pressuring for DRA political reform alongside

continuing Soviet military and economic support. Early that year, Najibullah announced the National Reconciliation Policy, a comprehensive plan encompassing a national ceasefire, a power-sharing agreement with the opposition, amnesty for political prisoners, and an offer to local mujahideen commanders of autonomous control and payments in exchange for ceasefires. With such increased expenditure, coupled with a decline in natural gas exports, the Soviet Union increased its aid by a further 83%, to $1.2 billion.

Afghan forces continued to grow to more than 323,000 soldiers, supported by 130,000 militia. Losses for the Soviet 40th Army that year declined to 1,215 killed and 1,004 wounded, while they increased for Afghan forces to more than 6,000 killed and nearly 13,000 wounded. Regardless of this, the DRA controlled only an estimated one-third of Afghanistan's districts.

From 1988 until the withdrawal of Soviet combat troops in February 1989, Gorbachev conducted what was described as a 'skilful orchestration of the diplomatic, military, and economic instruments [allowing] the USSR to depart on its [own] terms', combining 'unilateral declarations, negotiations, a dramatic increase in military and economic aid, and a two-phased withdrawal to navigate the Soviet Union out of the "graveyard of empires"'. As Gorbachev noted at a 1987 Politburo meeting, 'it is better to pay with money than with the lives of our people'.[22]

The military aspects of the campaign were undergirded by attempts to build a local economy.

* * *

Three kilometres south of Forward Operating Base Walton, towards Kandahar Airfield, is the Russian-built 'Kandahar Taixtel (sic) Factory', a sprawling complex of coal-fired boilers and giant dyeing machines and looms. We had been sent in September 2010 to the factory to explore its potential as a turnkey job-creator. After pushing open the factory's great seized-up doors with US Army MRAPs, we were to be disappointed.

It was the Mary Celeste of the textile business, with half-finished bolts of cloth from two decades earlier still wending their way through the machines, tailing off in rags on a concrete floor covered in pigeon droppings. Peeling insulation fluttered, too, inside the tin roof, while

packing cases for the Kleinewefers GmbH stamped ‘West Germany’ lay amidst the debris. Outside, the Afghan National Police guarded against looters wanting to turn the machines into scrap. The scale of refurbishment required to get the factory’s wheels turning again was not the main issue. There was a greater problem: there was no electricity to turn it back on.

The factory was a metaphor for Afghanistan’s promise snuffed out; for the failure of good intentions missing local ownership and entrepreneurship.

In all, 21,000 Soviet civilian specialists served in Afghanistan, building factories like this one and helping to develop infrastructure and stimulate the economy. These included teachers (the Soviets had trained over 70,000 labourers, engineers and technicians by 1980 alone) and many engineers, among a variety of specialists. There was even a cadre from the Youth Communist League of the Soviet Union, or Komsomol. The Komsomol team were sent to Afghanistan to work with peers after a ‘six-week crash course in the history, culture, traditions, and languages of Afghanistan’, says Braithwaite.[23]

Inside Afghanistan, as the Soviets withdrew, Najibullah continued pursuing the National Reconciliation Policy but reoriented it toward regime survival and an Islamic foundation for the nation. In the three-month-long Phase One of their retreat (15 May–15 August 1988), the Soviets withdrew over 50,000 troops while turning over their garrisons in Jalalabad, Ghazni, Gardez, Lashkar Gar, Kandahar and Kunduz to the Afghan Army.

After securing a Kabul air bridge, Phase Two (December 1988–15 February 1989), turned over garrisons in Kabul, Herat, Parwan, Samangan, Balkh and Baghlan provinces, while Operation Typhoon—an air and ground offensive into the Panjshir Valley—kept the mujahideen at bay. During the withdrawal, Soviet losses included 812 killed and 685 wounded while the Afghan Army’s losses escalated to 26,260 killed and 38,547 wounded. The Soviet Union left 200 military and KGB advisers in Kabul to support the now 329,000-strong DRA army, comparable in size to the 350,000-strong Afghan National Defence and Security Forces of 2021.

Weakened by the loss of Soviet air power (despite the government’s own air force comprising 7,000 personnel flying 240 attack aircraft that included MiG-21s, Su-7s, and MiG-17s; 150 helicopters; and 40 transport aircraft) Najibullah increased his ceasefire payments, adding another 30,000 militia to his payroll. Soviet aid increased to $2.6 billion in 1989, including the transfer of fuel, military equipment and ammunition and the start of

weekly 600-truck supply convoys, though the withdrawal of technical experts and capping of oil and gas wells was a significant economic blow.

Najibullah's 'government survived because he was competent, ruthless, and had a well-equipped and experienced army that was able to continue fighting even though they no longer had the Russians alongside them. He survived as long as the Russians supplied him with food, military equipment and ammunition,' says Braithwaite.[24]

With the Russian exit, Najibullah 'took much more courageous steps [with the National Reconciliation Policy] in terms of opening up the government and society, establishing links with tribal leaders, and shedding its communist image—all of which helped the DRA government to survive into 1992.'[25] But when the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991, Boris Yeltsin stopped the $3 billion Russian aid programme the following year. Once Najibullah could no longer pay the militias or his military, he fell from power in just four months.

Similarities

ISAF's military strategy paralleled that of the Soviets in aiming to control the population, secure lines of communication, 'Afghanise' the military operation, ensure further stabilisation and development and fight the insurgency, especially in the south and the east. Like the Soviets, ISAF struggled to secure the population. An estimated 36% of key districts were under government control by September 2011. Yet Soviet/Afghan troops densities were much higher than the West's. By 1987, 416,000 Afghan and Soviet forces combined to fight the mujahideen, a ratio of 37 soldiers to 1,000 population. In 2011, at the time of ISAF's peak strength, together with the ANA, the ratio was 9.7 per 1,000.

Afghan officials were, under ISAF as under the Soviets, widely viewed as foreign puppets and 'country-sellers', while the failures of Afghan governance and the inability to bring economic benefits to Afghans were seen as international failures. In both cases, public support for the presence of foreign forces was inversely proportional to civilian casualties.

The financial situation of the Karzai and Ghani administrations was similar, perhaps a little worse than Najibullah's in 1989. The Afghan government collected about $1.9 billion in revenue annually in 2010–2020, but annual expenditures were around twice that at $5 billion, with the

shortfall being made up by aid from the US and other donors.[26] According to official government statistics, the value of Afghanistan's (official, non-narcotics) exports fell from $403 million in 2009/10 to $375 million two years later, while imports were nearly twenty times this figure.[27] During the Soviet era there was significant income from handicrafts (around 10% of GDP) and, until the end of the war, oil and gas exports.

During both the Soviet and the Western era, few of the intervenors understood the depth and complexity of Afghanistan's tribal and ethnic makeup. Both international forces and some locals (for example, Tajiks and Uzbeks in Afghanistan) were seen as foreign, and cultural and linguistic barriers and lack of understanding of traditional Afghan values were substantial hurdles to cooperation.[28] Afghans' parochialism and conservative, change-averse nature is deeply rooted, and highlights a common strand across both eras and throughout Afghanistan's history. It resulted, in both cases, in a failure to build an overarching national identity amid competing tribal and geographical allegiances.

An inability to address widespread corruption and widening economic inequalities, a relative anathema during the Soviet and DRA era, ultimately backfired badly both for the Afghan government and its Western allies. This failure was exacerbated by a lack of public institutional capacity and private sector opportunities, especially among 'ordinary' (that is, not politically connected) Afghans.

Differences

Whereas the Taliban insurgency was, initially concentrated in the southern and eastern, predominantly Pashtun, areas, it grew over time to encompass significant areas of northern and western Afghanistan and to include significant non-Pashtun support (as discussed in Chapter Four). In contrast, from the outset the anti-DRA/anti-Soviet resistance movement existed all across Afghanistan with significant popular support.

The mujahideen also enjoyed widespread international support and legitimacy, including from Western sources, making it easier for them to fund and recruit, than did the Taliban. However, both the mujahideen and the Taliban accessed supply and sanctuary via Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Iran, as well as via non-state actors and drug smuggling networks.[29]

Whereas the jihad of the 1980s was always national in character, the Taliban struggle was initially ethnic and tribal, though it developed much more of a national character over time. Moreover, in spite of their expenditure, the Soviets visited considerable levels of destruction on many regions, in contrast to the relatively soft-handed and more carefully targeted Western/ISAF approach.

Najibullah's National Reconciliation Policy was a sophisticated attempt to combine elements of 'amnesty, a ceasefire, a new constitution, land reforms, elections, and the co-optation of mujahideen commanders to decrease violence and increase stability'.[30] He also pursued political reforms to accommodate the mujahideen, including the establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1987 and a multi-party system three years later.

In contrast, whatever his rhetoric towards the West, and despite the recognition by some members of ISAF of this imperative,[31] neither Karzai nor Ghani employed a similarly comprehensive plan to accommodate the Taliban politically. Just 2,497 Taliban reconciled in 2011, for example, while the cumulative number of ex-Taliban fighters reconciled numbered only 6,000 by November 2012, the bulk of them from the north and west.

Unlike Najibullah, who was described by many Soviets as intelligent, tough, resourceful and well-educated, presidents Karzai and Ghani were routinely characterised by their allies as 'weak' and accommodating of corrupt practices in the interest of maintaining what was portrayed as a 'false stability'.[32]

And there was one more crucial difference, seldom considered, that could have been used to the international community's advantage: the major local power brokers were, by 2021, personally wealthy, much more so than at the end of the Soviet occupation. That created a different set of stakeholders and incentives, and offered levers that could have been used by the international community, but which for some reason donors lacked the means, grasp or will to use.

This last point may reflect a final key difference. The Soviet Union was a single (albeit highly bureaucratic) actor during its occupation, applying a single policy in support of a single client DRA state. The ability to funnel funds through Najibullah cemented his authority, unified organisations and institutions around him, and helped make the Soviet approach cohesive.

By contrast, in Afghanistan the desire for many coalition flags as a sign of international support for the effort, along with the so-called 'sectoral

lead' approach that divided up different aspects of reconstruction among different donor countries, meant that there was never one single cohesive international strategy. Even within individual countries (notably the UK) civilian aid agencies often worked independently from the military on principle, while in others (notably the US) different services pursued their own strategic or tactical approaches.

National caveats and differing rules of engagement complicated every combat action, while the division of provinces and regional commands among different lead nations meant that coordination across boundaries was hard at times. Most absurdly, when the Obama administration created the position of Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) within the State Department—a position initially held by the veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke and designed to integrate effort across the Afghanistan-Pakistan region—almost every other coalition troop-contributing nation established a parallel position in its own structure, creating another policy layer and a further complication for coordinating the effort.

In Syria, a multiplicity of international donors tore the Syrian resistance to Bashar al-Assad apart over time as the various opposition groups forum-shopped from donor to donor and tailored their operations to a specific donor's priorities rather than their overall needs. Similarly, in Afghanistan the multiple competing (sometimes contradictory) policies of different donors allowed canny Afghan power brokers to play the field, while undermining unity of effort in a way the Soviets, for all their problems, never had to worry about.

Five Common Lessons

A comparison of the Soviet period with the ISAF/Resolute Support eras highlights five common lessons about countering insurgency.

First, as highlighted above, the fighting cannot end without a political solution, and this is best negotiated from a position of relative strength. This is easy to say, and blindingly obvious, but devilishly difficult to do.

Second, for all the discussion about territory under control, if the insurgents are still fighting, they are winning. The Afghans held out against the Soviets not because they were winning battles. They lost every direct contest, just as the North Vietnamese did against the Americans, ZANLA

and ZIPRA against the Rhodesians or, for that matter, the liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique in the 1960s and 1970s against the Portuguese. Nor did the mujahideen inflict unbearable casualties or costs on the Red Army. Their success came, as George Crile noted, 'because they simply kept in the game in spite of fearful losses both to their warriors and to the vast majority of the population that stood with them'. By 1985, it is estimated that one of every three Afghans had been forced out of the country by the Red Army and hundreds of thousands had died.

The strength of the DRA's armed forces was built up substantially through enormous infusions of arms, money and supplies, to the point that they could defeat the mujahideen in any conventional engagement. And yet Afghan government units were defecting *en masse* to the mujahideen, forcing the Soviets to take over the fighting against a 'dedicated, cunning, and increasingly well-armed guerrilla force'. They compensated for a lack of manpower through increasing dependence, like the Americans both before them in Vietnam and after them in Iraq and Afghanistan, on firepower.[33]

Even though the need to put Afghans in charge of the effort was well known, this proved to be a hopeless ambition. As John Terjelian, who had spent three years in Afghanistan with the CIA, warned the agency's Afghanistan point-man Gust Avrakotos when he took over running American clandestine support in the 1980s, 'Don't put white men in charge. Don't give [the Afghans] a lot of money. Don't trust them. It would be like throwing money into a cesspool. All they need,' he wrote, 'is a little help and the Russians will be sorry they ever went into that country.' Instead, all assistance, from the movement of supplies to training was facilitated and co-ordinated by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI).

This illustrates the third lesson, that it is extremely hard for insurgency to survive without a regional safe haven. The Viet Cong depended on Cambodia and North Vietnam. The CIA's Nicaraguan Contras spent most of their time in camps across the Honduran frontier. Without Pakistan, there could not have been a sustained resistance to the Soviet invasion, nor to the American-led intervention after 9/11. Foreign weapons and money helped but would not have been possible without Pakistani leadership during the Soviet era, particularly from Zia ul-Haq.

The Pakistanis understandably would always first and foremost safeguard their own interests, balancing support for the Taliban with

geopolitical considerations including the need, at least immediately after 2001, to be onside in the War on Terror and to address their concerns about India. During the Soviet era, as Zia put it, 'we must make the pot boil for the Russians but not so much that it boils over onto Pakistan'. US financial support for Pakistan helped during both eras, enabling Islamabad to justify the sacrifices forced upon it. During the Soviet period, Pakistan became the third-largest recipient of American foreign aid after Israel and Egypt. After 9/11, that aid grew more than ten-fold, from $180 million in 2001 to $2.6 billion in 2011.[34]

The need for regional influence and, above all, for strategic depth has driven Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan. As Anatol Lieven put it, '[T]he Pakistani establishment's approach to Afghanistan has long been driven by a mixture of fear and ambition. The fear is…of Afghanistan… becoming an Indian client state, leading to India's encirclement of Pakistan. In recent years,' he wrote in 2012, 'belief in the need for a relationship with the Taliban has been strengthened by the growing conviction that the West is going to fail in Afghanistan.…'[35]

The fourth lesson centres on the nature of development, getting everyone to work together, and to benefit together from the government. If this does not happen, resentment and support for the opposition is inevitable. Avoiding transactionalism and short-term fixes (such as paying off warlords) is especially important, since it only breeds resentment and corrupts governance. In favouring power brokers such as Gul Agha Sherzai in Kandahar, for example, America effectively destabilised the south of Afghanistan, doing more to perpetuate the very warlord elite that the Taliban had become popular for evicting. This is discussed in detail in Chapter Three. These short-term solutions served to reinforce corruption as the underlying system of governance in Afghanistan. Similarly, misplaced aid risks created a corrupt elite: one that, in the case of Afghanistan, was formed not just from the old warlords but from a new generation of business leaders living on the legal periphery.

Successful interventions take time, given the need to allow local solutions to develop. Patience is crucial, and is the most formidable combat capability of all. Yet too many actors and projects chasing too many short-term projects can overwhelm and undermine already fragile institutions in the search for quick fixes rather than longer-term capacity development.

Politicians continually tried to find a way out of Afghanistan, even when they were going deeper in. ‘Five days or five weeks or five months, but it certainly isn’t going to last any longer than that,’ Donald Rumsfeld blithely asserted before the Iraq War in 2003.[36] Seeking short-term solutions, keeping one eye on Iraq and one foot out of the door, and always looking for a quick fix, the US-led coa-lition could never build the links between citizens and the state that were required to stabilise Afghanistan. ‘There is, at the end of the day, very little that is quick, easy, or inexpensive in the conduct of a comprehensive civil-military counter-insurgency campaign in a context that features the myriad challenges of Afghanistan,’ said General David Petraeus, ISAF commander in 2010–11. ‘Though it sure would have helped had we done much more early on than we did.’[37]

Solving this problem demands addressing conditions of poverty and state failure, as these nurture a hatred for the state (and for the intervener). Money is as useful, and as dangerous, as ammunition in this regard. Yet victory, as defined by stability, relative prosperity and improved governance, is a much longer and harder row to hoe. It also requires building organically on the existing societal structure and state apparatus, no matter how weak it is. Systems that exist, that have survived decades of war, by definition are there for a reason.

It is impossible to roll-out complex foreign governance practices in such environments, where papers and plans never survive contact with reality on the ground. All of that requires a large percentage of aid going to the state, rather than to international NGOs and contractors. At the same time, there is a risk of overwhelming weak state structures with large volumes of aid—as was often done in Afghanistan, over-watering the first green shoots of success, killing good initiatives with kindness or pumping particular local programmes up too rapidly for them to remain sustainable.

Usually, the right sort of aid is the type that seeks to strengthen, not bypass or overwhelm, a weak local state, and not strengthen the balance sheets of external contractors and NGOs. It’s also the type that seeds and builds businesses, either directly by sponsoring a good idea or indirectly by reducing the costs of doing business through measures such as improved infrastructure.

In this there is a need to provide what businesses want, not what international actors think is best for them. Asked in 2010 about the biggest challenges facing their communities, Kandaharis overwhelmingly listed

unemployment, an absence of stable electricity and high prices as their biggest concerns.[38] Yet in Kandahar the Canadian government focused its aid on education, healthcare and the restoration of irrigation. The international community is routinely guilty of 'fire-hosing' the population with what it *thinks* they need, rather than addressing their concerns.

Finally, the fifth lesson is that success depends fundamentally on understanding the nature and distribution of power within society. The failings of international efforts in Afghanistan often had their roots in wishful thinking, superficial analysis and unrealistic objectives. Removing the Taliban may have been an attainable objective, at least in parts of Afghanistan, but not an enduring one for all Afghans. But nation-building was probably beyond the international community, in Afghanistan as elsewhere, at least as it was defined—liberal democracy, economic order, education for women, no poppies, no corruption.

Ironically, the latter was fuelled by billions of dollars of misdirected aid, much of which corrupted not only the Afghans but the Westerners who were there to 'help'. Now, some of the biggest culprits claim that the intervention could have succeeded had it not been for the ungrateful, incompetent and corrupt Afghans themselves. This is an unfair evasion of the international community's own responsibilities.

The utter, catastrophic failure we witnessed in Afghanistan was partly due to a lack of understanding or willingness to accept that Afghanistan, like Pakistan or even India, is different from the West. In Afghanistan, there is little internal unity or allegiance to the central state. This is not just a matter of ethnic and regional differences or geographic remoteness, but a lack of loyalty and faith in state institutions that reflects hyper-localised power relationships.

'We Pakistanis can't unite behind a revolution,' one put it, 'because we can't unite behind anything.'[39] The language and strength of kinship, the importance of familial hierarchy and the weakness of state institutions as a result of the country's tiny tax base, in fact cements social stability through the dominance of patron-client relationships, militarised local elites (i.e. warlords) and, as Lieven notes, 'urban bosses'.

The power of these ties can be seen in the violence of retribution in matters of public prestige and shame. As one diplomat observed, 'Long before ISAF arrived on the scene, Helmand was a rough, basic place, where disputes were settled by violence.'

This is not only, or not necessarily, a recognition of social and political weakness, but also of power. Social ties are perpetuated in spite of attempts to change them through ideological or theological revolution, or via social and political reform. Local clans and local patronage continuously frustrate the attempts of modernists to build a united and unitary state. Afghanistan remains a nation of ethnic and kinship groups, held in balance through constant rivalry and conflict with one another, with violence fed by suspicion and fear.

Allied with the natural toughness to match their surroundings, the fragmented, close-knit kinship structures of Afghan society give Afghans huge potency as a guerrilla army, since traditional Afghan society lacks a single power centre that can be controlled, co-opted or decapitated. As both the Soviets and ISAF discovered, this decentralised system of command and control made Afghan resistance movements as tough to defeat as it has made it difficult for Afghan governments to rule.

Both the Soviets and ISAF failed to understand Afghan society. William Dalrymple, for instance, found among Pashtun areas of rural Afghanistan that the locals actually preferred the Taliban to the government, for two main reasons: Taliban justice was rough but honest—you didn't have to bribe a judge to get a decision—and the Taliban, unlike Afghan police, did not abduct and rape their boys and young men.[40] Even though the Taliban were small-minded and violent, bringing a reign of terror and imposing a social order that restricted women, enforced ignorance, and harboured international terrorists, they were not an alien force from outer space. Rather, they emerged organically in reaction to the chaos and banditry of mujahideen fighters, who fought each other after defeating the Soviets.

Understanding what makes a country and its people tick, why decisions are made, how politics and the economy intersect, and how incentives inform actions must inform the way outsiders think about getting a population—or a sufficiently large portion of it—on side to win a war. And this depends on understanding their needs, and offering improvements, whether to security or basic services.

Protecting the population, not attacking the insurgents, thus becomes the priority. As Peter Jouvenal has noted, much of the motivation for individuals to pick up weapons is less about religion than the imperative of wealth creation, as this is a pre-requisite for marriage, starting a family, and obtaining land. There are few other routes available for young, poorly

schooled rural Afghans.[41] From the perspective of the intervenor, acquiring such an understanding demands longer personnel rotations to build expertise, as the US attempted with the Af-Pak Hands, ensuring institutional memory and diminishing the tendency for every new commander to start afresh, repeating the same mistakes and learning the same lessons over again.[42]

As Lakhdar Brahimi urges, 'throwing people at these problems is not the way to solve them. Rather this should be informed by knowledge, and an investment in intelligence, since we seldom know very much, if anything, about these situations.' He recalls that he resigned as UN Special Envoy in 1999. At a closed session of the Security Council, 'I told them I was resigning because we had made no progress, because you sent me to what you think is a faraway country that you don't care about. I ended my presentation by saying that they were wrong, and that one day, Afghanistan would explode—as it did almost exactly two years later.'[43]

The local story on the ground—like ground combat itself—is never binary, black and white, victory or defeat, good versus evil. It is always shades of grey. In Afghanistan, for example, battles were never, or never solely, between the Taliban and the government. They were rather fought around a series of tribal and other disputes where 'foreign forces were unwittingly being used to settle old scores,' and where the term 'Taliban' could be used as a badge of convenience to justify an action as being against foreign infidels.[44]

Jonathan Powell, Blair's former chief of staff, who successfully led peace negotiations in Northern Ireland and Colombia, describes the Taliban as being akin to a Portuguese Man-o-War, a composite entity brought together by a common enemy despite tribal, ideological, personal, and geographic rivalries. This make-up continuously threatens civil war absent the common foe, and dooms Afghanistan to perennial weakness and instability.

* * *

The Soviet forces, military and civilian, were inadequate to achieve a military victory. At best, they could only prevent their Afghan allies losing ground. The Soviet army found its tactics inadequate to meet the challenges

posed by the difficult terrain and the highly motivated mujahideen. Both the Soviets and ISAF underestimated their enemy.

Afghanistan, over time, became a war without fronts where, as Bernard Fall said of Vietnam, terrain and people inexorably turned the tables on technology. Neither the Taliban's home-ground advantage in the valleys and the hills, nor the failure to grasp the relationship between politics and war should detract from the tenacity and instinctive fighting skill of Afghan guerrillas and, equally importantly, their sustained commitment to the cause.

In explaining the Soviet failure, one Ukrainian veteran of the Soviet Army says that 'probably the reason is in Afghanistan itself. This country remained for a long time in the Middle Ages and is not ready either for socialism, which the Soviets tried to implement, or for capitalism, which the West was building. The history of Afghanistan teaches that it cannot be conquered.'[45]

Well-funded attempts at national reconciliation and reforming the government around Islamic principles while stripping it of its Marxist revolutionary agenda (and changing its name in 1987) did not ultimately prevent the Soviet failure. Nor did vast military aid prevent Najibullah's eventual, catastrophic fall. At the same time, while the CIA-directed programme to arm and train the mujahideen was successful in terms of the narrow aim of giving the Soviets a hard time, ultimately Washington, too, failed to control the forces it had unleashed. The mujahideen became their own worst enemies as disagreements and infighting among regional commanders led to widespread destruction in Kabul, which until then had largely escaped the ravages of war.

The Afghan civil war set the stage for the rise of the Taliban. As with the Americans in Doha, an international agreement got the Russians out of Afghanistan. The April 1988 Geneva Accords, signed by representatives of the USSR, the US, Pakistan and the Republic of Afghanistan, provided a framework for the departure of Soviet forces.

'The Russians realised, at the outset, that you could not turn people into good communists in one generation' observes Braithwaite. 'They went in and changed things, including the leadership. And then they didn't leave. This was,' he says, 'the same mistake made by the Americans.'[46] The longer the struggle went on, the more the mood changed, as the popular

songs of the time reflected, from an appetite to fight, to the inevitability of leaving, as Igor Morozov sang.

Coupled with overstretch in their economy, the cost of competing with the richest country in the world, growing public disquiet, and the disaster of Chernobyl (which happened at the height of the war, in 1986, and took half a million troops to clean up) Afghanistan arguably changed the Soviet Union more than vice versa.

The ghosts of past failed missions led to Western promises after 9/11 that this time things would be different. Hence, the mutual commitments—better governance by the Afghans and continued aid and security from the international community—emerged, in an effort to grease the wheels of shorter-term economic prosperity and thus political stability.

General Gromov, interviewed in July 2021, doubted that a victorious Taliban would seek mischief in the region. 'The Taliban are not such fools or adventurers to throw themselves on someone else's machine guns,' he said. 'They aren't actually all that strong, and they have a hard job ahead to gain a foothold on power in Afghanistan. They don't need to make enemies by attacking other countries.'[47]

Gromov reportedly swore at Soviet television crews attempting to interview him while leaving Afghanistan over the Friendship Bridge. In recalling these events, the general later said that his words were directed at 'the leadership of the country, at those who start wars while others have to clean up the mess'.[48]

* * *

3

ASSESSING FOUR FAILURES

'Afghans keep making the same mistake.'

Dr Mohammed Najibullah, former president of Afghanistan, 1996[1]

'By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall….'

President George W. Bush, Virginia Military Institute, 17 April 2002

'*The senseless violence has to stop. But it's gonna be very difficult. But we're gonna stick with you. And we're gonna do our best to see to it you have the tools you need.'*

President Joe Biden, 25 June 2021[2]

Failure to put in place the domestic and regional conditions for peace, or to apply sufficient diplomatic leverage to achieve a peace deal, was one obvious failure of the international approach to Afghanistan. But there are others, from the failure to install a system of responsive and clean governance, to the failure to create conditions encouraging economic activity outside of aid.

Key among these failures is the failure of politics, and the creation of conditions of political inclusion. And this reflects, fundamentally, a failure of leadership.

The Failure of Politics

Countering insurgencies requires a political solution. Yet politics, ironically, is most often the area where politicians fail, since the components are never all there, or present in the right quantities, in Africa as in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia.[3] And political leaders almost never possess the will or the wherewithal to realise the nature of the political problem they face, or to enforce a political solution.

As noted earlier, not accepting the Taliban's surrender after the fall of Kandahar in 2001 or bringing them to the negotiating table at the Bonn Conference in December of that year, were extremely serious missed opportunities, as Ashraf Ghani himself concurs. It is undeniable that talks produce results when both sides have reached the difficult conclusion that another, more peaceful, way than fighting has to be found to resolve the outcome. If one side is still up for the fight and has the will and wherewithal to do so, talks are only a means to explore the strength of your opponent, or to gain an advantage. Moreover, in the early stages of the conflict, at least until 2010, the outside world was battling to talk to the Afghans per se, not least because of the challenge of understanding why they were fighting at all. 'When it suited some of them to side with the Taliban,' recalls Graeme Lamb, 'they did; when it didn't, they didn't. It was and remains a deeply local environment caught between their deep-seated beliefs, their long and hard-earned culture, tribal affiliation, and honour and fighting as the definitive measure of a man's worth.'[4]

The Afghan tendency to switch sides—to engage in hedging behaviour, swing to the apparently stronger side, play both sides against the middle or avoid any firm commitment at all—was not merely a feature of a sophisticated politico-military culture that treats talking while fighting as normal, and side-switching as the default pathway to victory. It reflected an early realisation by Afghans that the coalition would not be in it for the long haul. Still, there were early opportunities for political manoeuvre, arising

from the circumstances in which the Taliban found themselves after 9/11, scattered as they were across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Chris Kolenda spent fifteen months commanding an airborne infantry task force in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in 2007/8 on his first of four tours of duty in Afghanistan. He went on to advise the Pentagon on Afghan strategy, returning to Afghanistan in a similar role with Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus from June 2009 to October 2010, before heading back to the Pentagon and representing the Secretary of Defense in talks with the Taliban in 2011–13. He returned to Afghanistan to advise General Joe Dunford in 2014, resigning 'in frustration' to start his own consultancy business. In 2017/18 he was involved in track two talks with the Taliban office in Doha 'to get a peace process started'.[5]

Kolenda says the failure to engage and make peace with the Taliban back in 2001 was a missed opportunity. 'Our leverage was greater than theirs until 2010 when it was more or less equal,' he notes. By 2018, when the 'US finally put political capital behind the talks, the leverage was now asymmetrical. The US was now in [such a weak] situation that it traded a 100% troop withdrawal in exchange for an unfavourable peace with the Taliban.' In 2001, he observes, it was the US that said no.

Thereafter the Karzai government preferred not to negotiate, as 'the Afghans were not interested or not willing to share the spoils. Historically,' he says, 'it is the host nation which is most reluctant as they feel that they have the most to lose. It is the implicit mentality of a zero-sum victory—a fallacious belief that there has to be a winner and a loser—that creates strategic blind spots, which is why we always missed the opportunity for talks.'

In part, these political failures also reflected a failure of the advice politicians received, the belief that military operations could determine the moment to negotiate for peace, and a delinquent political class willing to sub-contract that decision to those in the field.[6]

Bernard Fall concluded fifty-four years ago in Vietnam that the support of the local populace was absolutely vital to countering an insurgency. While, he maintained, large-scale military firepower would be needed and used, the inevitable killing of civilians would result in heightened local resentment. 'In revolutionary war,' he wrote, 'the allegiance of the civilian population becomes one of the most vital objectives of the whole struggle… Military tactics and hardware are all well and good, but they are quite

useless if one has lost the confidence of the population among whom one is fighting.'[7]

Fall realised that the struggle in Vietnam had to be won political-ly if it was to be won at all, notwithstanding the awesome firepower of the American military which, while it might make the war 'militarily unlosable,' would come at a profound cost. Political force cannot be obliterated by firepower.[8]

A complementary perspective was offered by legendary Vietnam counter-insurgency adviser John Paul Vann. 'Security may be 10% of the problem, or it may be 90%, but whichever it is, it's the first 10% or the first 90%,' Vann would say. 'Without security, nothing else we do will last.'[9] And therein lies the problem with military force in these environments. The military is often the only institution capable of delivering development or governance under conditions of extreme insecurity, but the fighting skills (and the understandably combative posture) of fighting units can be deeply unsuited to those tasks.

Moreover, the overuse of kinetic force in Afghanistan was often extremely counter-productive. This was not so much a matter of firepower *per se* as of discrimination—the ability to distinguish legitimate targets from the background environment, then decide when, whom, and how to engage with lethal force and, crucially, when not to engage at all. Discrimination requires proximity to the population, which in turn requires enough troops, and troops of the right kind.

One of Vann's most famous sayings, recounted by veteran journalist Neil Sheehan, was 'This is a political war and it calls for discrimination in killing. The best weapon for killing would be a knife, but I'm afraid we can't do it that way. The worst is an airplane. The next worst is artillery. Barring a knife, the best is a rifle—you know who you're killing.'[10]

Because of a lack of political will, there were never enough troops, whether Afghans or coalition troops, and certainly never enough of them with the right skills for this kind of work, at any time during the war. As a consequence, the intervenors tended to reach for the big stick of massive firepower to compensate for the lack of numbers.

The honour code of Pashtunwali, with its principles of courage (*tora*), revenge (*badal*), hospitality to a stranger (*melmestia*), and sanctuary to a fugitive (*nanawatai*) has many peaceful obligations including generosity to a defeated foe, but also lends itself to endless cycles of lethal payback. To

put it another way, out of a total population of roughly 30 million Afghans, if only 10% were willing to support the Taliban, and 10% of those were prepared to do so actively, and 10% of active Taliban supporters were to take up arms against ISAF, that would be 30,000 people. Even if a counter-insurgent force killed all 30,000, it might simply be creating another 30,000 enemies, driving the cycle of revenge on and on.

But there is a broader problem in dealing with any resistance movement that feeds off a mass base, as the Taliban did. The centre of gravity of such a movement lies not in the few thousand active, full-time fighters carrying weapons and directly engaging in combat. These are just the tip of the iceberg, operating overtly above the surface, who (if found and fixed in such a way that they can be forced to stand and fight) can be relatively easily defeated. This is far easier said than done, of course.

But even if you could defeat the guerrilla force, down below the surface lies a far larger entity—the support systems, supply networks, trainers, facilitators and enabling organisations that form the auxiliary element of the movement. Below them is the underground with its clandestine sympathiser, intelligence, propaganda and financial networks. The further down the iceberg you go, the more covert the structure becomes and thus the harder to understand and counter. Yet, clearly, each layer is an order of magnitude larger than the one above: for 30,000 guerrillas you might expect 300,000 members of auxiliary organisations, and three million sympathisers.

In this example, then, only 30,000 people out of a total resistance movement of 3.3 million—less than 1% of the total population—are actual guerrilla combatants. When the vast majority of people engaged in an insurgency are not fighting openly with guns, clearly the centre of gravity lies deep below the waterline. Trying to defeat a mass-based movement of this kind through purely kinetic action against its relatively tiny combat component is a fool's errand, like trying to sink an iceberg by scraping ice off the top.

On the other hand, going deep into the real centre of gravity of the movement to disrupt, dismantle and defeat it, means engaging with civilians who do not carry weapons, are not directly participating in hostilities, and may be women, children or old people—in other words, people whom it would be neither ethical nor legal to attack with lethal force. This, in a nutshell, was the West's dilemma in Afghanistan: to defeat the Taliban we

needed to get among the people, down where the enemy's centre of gravity lay, and apply non-military tools such as reconciliation, reconstruction and rule of law rather than heavy firepower. But we were neither properly organised, nor adequately equipped, nor suitably trained, nor sufficiently numerous, nor knowledgeable enough about Afghan society to pull it off.

This political problem became ever more obvious as the war progressed. By the end of the surge period in December 2014—in effect, the end of the counter-insurgency (COIN) phase of the war and the beginning of Security Force Assistance (SFA) in support of Afghan forces who were now carrying the main combat burden against the Taliban—Western leaders began a concerted effort to negotiate with, and ultimately to accommodate, the Taliban leadership.

This accommodation was pursued at different levels, with some success for a time, through lower-level reintegration of 'ten-dollar a day, for hire' Taliban fighters. But the reintegration programme—modelled on a similar programme from Iraq, and on earlier examples from Vietnam and Malaya—brought only limited results.

Often, indeed, Taliban fighters at the end of the campaigning season in autumn would reintegrate, reconcile and come in from the cold. They would spend the winter in the cities, resting in warm accommodation, eating hot food and learning much about how the government and the coalition operated, before leaving again in the spring for the poppy harvest and to join the insurgents in time for the annual Taliban offensive. As a result, 'integration' became cynically known, by many in the field, as 'wintergration.'

Top-level strategic reconciliation was, however, even more challenging and problematic, and soldiers were dissuaded from suggesting it in public since the Taliban was a proscribed terrorist organisation. It was clear that the Taliban wanted to talk, first, to the US, as the principal adversary; failing that, there was little progress to be made. Both of us took part in informal talks at various times, engaging with Taliban representatives or their designated intermediaries. As civilian advisers, operating under the direction of senior military and civilian officials, we could engage in a way that lower-level military commanders could not.

Throughout these discussions the Taliban's message (delivered through intermediaries or directly communicated in the media) was consistent—they would agree not to maintain a relationship with Al-Qaeda and

promised not to be a threat to any other country. In return, all foreigners had to leave, and the internal affairs of Afghanistan must be left to Afghans. This nationalist message was based on the assumption that if the foreigners did indeed depart, the Taliban would win any internal conflict.

The absence of one, single charismatic leader made it difficult to heal these tribal fractures, while Pakistan was always, as one British negotiator put it, 'going to hedge given what was going on, just as it had done for the last thirty years'. The unwillingness, too, of the US to treat allies as more than 'useful adornments', as the former UK ambassador to Afghanistan Sherard Cowper-Cowles put it, and to cut them into the strategic design of the peace process, undermined cohesion, ensuring that the Taliban enjoyed all the leverage.[11]

Negotiations demanded at least three parallel tracks: one internal; one involving international partners, centring on the US-Taliban relationship; and one focused on the region. Direct talks in Doha between the US and the Taliban unfortunately undermined the internal negotiations, not helped by the Government of Afghanistan's delaying tactics, while the unwillingness of the US to risk escalation in order to make the agreements or conditionality stick, effectively handed the Taliban all the power. The US could not—or did not want to—deliver Pakistan, focusing on the accumulation rather than the application of leverage.[12]

In the end, the Taliban calculus proved entirely correct, underlining the impossibility of successful stabilisation and development under conditions of conflict without first finding a political solution. A deal between Taliban and non-Taliban political forces was only, however, one aspect. Any political solution had also to achieve a degree of domestic unity and trust among non-Taliban actors. The difficulty in achieving this was obvious and, ultimately, catastrophic.

The key stumbling-block was a lack of trust among leaders and factions and that, too, reflected both of a failure of method and lack of leadership. It manifested itself in the weak turnout in Afghan elections—less than 20% of eligible voters cast a vote in 2019, down from 60% in 2014. International donors were little help, in part because they did not understand Afghanistan and in part because they did not want to understand it, to own its problems, and thus get drawn into its politics, even though this was inherently a political struggle demanding a political solution. The same dynamic

operated at the regional level in terms of managing the political complexities and competing interests of Afghanistan's neighbours.

The Failure of Policy on Pakistan

> *'One disruption which may enable or help mend India-Pakistan relations is when we have a political-dominated army instead of the current army-dominated politics in Pakistan. But will that happen? This is the million-dollar question.'*
>
> General Ved Malik, former Army Chief of Staff, India[13]

Torkham gate, at the foot of the Khyber Pass in Pakistan, is evidence of the benefits of closer collaboration, with queues of hundreds of highly adorned trucks and people patiently waiting their turn to cross. Conversation at the lunch table in Jalalabad turns, immediately, to cricket, and the relative strengths of regional teams and leagues. There are myriad commercial, and thus political, opportunities in closer regional integration, from the cheaper data and improved banking services that would flow from shared fibre-optic belts, to hydro-power complexes, akin to what President Ghani had described as an 'Asian Roundabout'.[14] Iran also needs a stable Afghanistan, given its history of conflict with the Taliban and need for partners amidst US sanctions, while China and Russia—for different reasons—keep a close eye on Afghan stability.

Peace in Afghanistan is closely linked to stability in neighbouring Pakistan, yet the latter's own challenges require a state-building project of its own. Despite its nuclear-power status, Pakistan remains hostage to its own domestic dysfunctions and divisions, compounded by a multi-decade power struggle among civilian politicians, civil society and the country's powerful military. Its dynamics are also affected by the incredible increase in its population from only 33 million in what was then West Pakistan at partition in 1947, to 142 million in 2000, to 216 million just twenty years later.

The relationship with Afghanistan is complicated by the latter's refusal to recognise the Durand Line, named after Sir Mortimer Durand, who negotiated the 1893 agreement between British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan under Abdur Rahman Khan, creating a 1,600-mile boundary

through the Hindu Kush. This is a border that separates two states but divides a nation, cutting through the world's Pashtun population and leaving three million Afghans and twenty million Pakistanis with relatives in Afghanistan on Islamabad's side of the border.

South of the Line, Pashtuns comprise 20% of Pakistan's population, an edgy and influential component; north of it, half of Afghanistan's people. Both countries are 'lumpy stews', to use journalist Declan Walsh's apt term from his book *The Nine Lives of Pakistan*,[15] of tribes, regional influences, religious sects, cultures and tongues, with 'quivering' strands to their DNA that threaten to pull these countries apart. In Pakistan's case, these stresses are so great, and potentially so traumatic, that a strategic case for the international mission in Afghanistan could have been made on the grounds of its stabilising effect in Pakistan alone.

For their part, leaders in Pakistan—and particularly those in the Pakistani military and the ISI—have always seen India as their principal geopolitical competitor and as an existential threat. This is unsurprising, since the nuclear-armed neighbours have fought several wars since independence. Pakistan's support for the Taliban has been driven by a perfectly rational fear of encirclement by India. The latter's relationships with Afghanistan and after 1947 with the Soviet Union, convinced planners in Islamabad that they could not afford to allow a strong, stable Afghanistan to their west if it was to be aligned with the main enemy to their east. Thus, during the Soviet-Afghan War, Pakistan backed the mujahideen and worked with China and the US to support the anti-Soviet resistance.

When the Russians left in 1989, and the Americans lost interest in the problems of Afghanistan and Pakistan as the Cold War ended and Afghanistan descended into civil war, the ISI's relationship with Afghan groups became critical to prevent a power vacuum that might have been filled by India. The Taliban—students from madrassas in southern and eastern Afghanistan who had emerged from a brief period of retirement after fighting the Soviets to apply a harsh version of vigilante justice in stabilising their areas against the depredations of regional warlords—became a key partner for the ISI.

The ISI's relationship with the Taliban enabled Islamabad to extend and secure its sphere of influence in Afghanistan. Support for the Taliban, indeed the existence of the Taliban itself as a political movement, was

important for Pakistan's interests, at least from the perspective of its national security elite.

'Partly this was because the Taliban could be understood as an expression of ethnic Pashtun nationalism as well as of religious ideology,' observes Steve Coll.[16] 'The Pashtuns were a tribally organised community bound by centuries of history along the Afghan-Pakistan border as well as by a distinct language.' Support for the Taliban, in terms of the supply of money and weapons, in training and even leading operations, was a way for Islamabad to offset its relative military weakness in relation to India.

But the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, in which Pakistan had been both a springboard and beneficiary, had unleashed powerful, predictably violent and yet possibly uncontrollable forces inside Pakistan itself. The Cambridge-educated, Karachi-based journalist Ahmed Rashid is the best-selling author of several volumes on the politics of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. His book *Descent into Chaos*, published in 2008, examines the challenges faced by the coalition in Afghanistan, including the belief that it could count on the Pakistani government. He highlights the impact of the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the West and Pakistan as being particularly problematic in the search for peace.

It is not as if Pakistan has had no skin in the anti-terror struggle since 9/11. Its people have paid a high price as Islamabad, presented with Washington's 'with us or against us' demands, turned from being an ally of the Taliban to a partial, and often reluctant, collaborator with Washington. In the two decades since 2001, more than 65,000 people in Pakistan have died in the 'War on Terror'. A large number of Afghan refugees have made their way to their neighbour too, stressing already fragile socio-economic and political circumstances. Yet Islamabad continues to play both sides, as evident in the housing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad. 'In fact,' states Rashid, 'in 2003, Pakistan revived the Taliban to bring about a balance of power in Afghanistan.'[17]

Fundamentally, says the author, 'Until Pakistan is fixed, it will be difficult to bring peace to Afghanistan. Until Pakistan helps to connect the whole region, from the Gulf to China, the West's efforts are inadequate and counterproductive.' Rather than 'seeing itself as a hub in the great trading economies of the world and supporting an economic settlement of this sort,' he contends, 'Pakistan supports the Taliban.'

The reason for this is that, according to Rashid, Pakistan's political economy 'is dominated by the military. One third of the national budget goes on the military, which has an extraordinarily good lifestyle: the best schools, hospitals, training, IT, and pensions. It gets to determine its own budget, how much is spent on itself, and how much is spent on economic development, and the public.' Its role remains a paradox.

Ghani's national security adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, gave one Afghan perspective on this dilemma. 'The military is the only thing that keeps Pakistan stable. It is outsized and a burden; yet, if you punish it, there is nothing to keep the country stable.'[18]

Paradoxically—and yet, a familiar pattern for anyone who has ever worked with a guerrilla movement—it often seemed as if ISI controlled the Taliban more effectively when its officers did not attempt to run it directly. The US and NATO failed to understand, Rashid argues, that the Taliban belong to neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan. Rather they are a lumpen population: the product of refugee camps, radicalised and militarised madrassas (of which there are 30,000 in Pakistan alone), and the lack of opportunities in both countries, especially the borderlands between the two. They are caught between being citizens of a modern society, with all its material accoutrements, and a traditional tribally-based society in which honour codes and customs shape behaviour.

The limited ability of developmental aid to change Pakistan's direction is compounded, Rashid says, by donors' failure to make that aid more conditional. 'Every year there is an aid summit. The donors make demands of democracy, human rights and women, for example, and improving the tax base, but these issues are never implemented.' Instead, the donors are cast as the enemy. 'To get rid of this myth,' he says, 'donors need to educate the public about their choices, and why they are calling for reform.'

And all this is exacerbated by the failure of donor co-ordination, and the resultant duplication and waste. Together, this combination—weak donor resolve, poor policy, moral hazard and a perverse governance environment—explains why aid has made little difference, he says, in Afghanistan as in Pakistan 'despite the enormous opportunity, after 9/11 to use the combination of international aid and cancelled debt to change the direction of the country and the region'.

Some $73 billion (at 2001 prices) in foreign aid was disbursed to Pakistan between 1960 and 2001. During that time Pakistan's annual per

capita income rose from $300 to $820, though poverty remained very high at over two-thirds of the population.[19] Since then, an estimated $35 billion in aid has been transferred, about one third of which has been dedicated to economic and developmental needs.[20]

Economic reform could help make more of this assistance. Even though much aid has been wasted or stolen, there has been a consistent and significant decline in poverty from 2001 to 2015. The poverty headcount, measured using the national benchmark, fell to one-quarter of the population. The main reason for this was not aid, but an increase 'in employment opportunities outside the agriculture sector' and in remittances; essentially, payments from Pakistanis working in the Gulf and elsewhere.[21]

Shaukat Aziz served as Prime Minister of Pakistan from 2004 to 2007, and earlier as Finance Minister for eight years from November 1999. Following his three mantras that urged the country to 'liberalise, deregulate and privatise', Pakistan was able to streamline government, creating fresh opportunities in the process. 'We reduced the 52 permits that were needed to set up businesses, which we inherited from our colonial master. In so doing, we reduced the baksheesh element, changing the incentives.' These reforms resulted in significant inward investment in the automotive sector, and in infrastructure, especially in energy and ports. 'The banking sector went 'from being all government owned to only one bank being government owned,' recalls Aziz.[22]

His tenure brought economic progress to Pakistan, ending the era of stagflation in 2001, boosting annual growth to 6.4%, bringing down inflation and further reducing poverty. Growth declined after he left office. He remains, to this day, the only Pakistani prime minister to complete his term and then leave, saying 'reform is a continuous process' and he 'was getting stale'.

It was not aid that made Pakistan's progress possible under Aziz, even though the effect of assistance on cashflow was complementary to his reform efforts. Rather, development progress was due to reform—in spite of the fact that Aziz served as Prime Minister for a military regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf. Convincing the Pakistan military that reform was in its enlightened self-interest was crucial for Aziz; he did so using a stick and carrot approach—incentives and disincentives. In future, this will require convincing the military, says Rashid, that its status depends on

China's Belt and Road Initiative, on the one hand, and assuaging Western concerns on the other. To do this, however, requires a leap of faith from a position where, in his words, 'Everything [in the Pakistani military] is justified on the grounds of security and for defence against India—where everything is subordinate to the India question.'

Pakistan's complicity with the Taliban afforded it freedom of manoeuvre, a guarantee of 'strategic depth' that pushed the Afghan border and its own insecurities to the northwest, giving Islamabad a set of geopolitical benefits that was difficult for the West to ignore or challenge. Pakistan allowed the Taliban to train, recoup, rearm, plan and recruit without hindrance or threat. It provided them with a launchpad for operations into Afghanistan, and sanctuary for a government in exile. The Pashtun honour code guaranteed Taliban leaders in Pakistan security and succour, though the support of many Pashtuns was never in doubt for reasons of tribe, religion, and the absence of alternatives, particularly once the West went after the drug trade.

If Pakistan's regional outlook is grounded in its existential conflict with India, its unreliable support for Western and Afghan stability is a consequence of its experience during the forty years since the Soviet intervention. Pakistan's perception is moulded by what Islamabad sees as its betrayal after the Soviet retreat in 1989, leaving it with a civil war on its borders and more than three million Afghan refugees within them.[23]

Thereafter the US halted military and economic assistance because of Pakistan's nuclear programme, cutting off military training opportunities (and coincidentally giving rise to a generation of Pakistani military officers with little understanding of or affection for the US), only for the country to return as an ally after 9/11. Unsurprisingly, trust runs low and, with its own significant Pashtun population, Islamabad was never going to turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy, given the belief (later vindicated) that Western forces would eventually leave.[24]

As former US Ambassador Ryan Crocker said in 2016, for the West to change Pakistan's calculus would have meant having no calendar for with drawal, making it clear that Washington was prepared to keep its forces in Afghanistan for as long as necessary. As Crocker observed, 'Americans are short-term. Our adversaries count on that, and our allies fear it.'[25]

In his long journalistic career, Sandy Gall has spent considerable time with leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including General Zia ul-Haq,

considered by some to be the father of the Taliban through his active support for the mujahideen in the war against the Soviets. At the core, Gall believes, 'India and Pakistan must somehow be brought together, persuaded to solve their differences and encouraged to make peace.'[26]

Was it possible to encourage Pakistan to stop its deceit—taking money from the West with one hand, and helping the Taliban with the other? Gall believed this had to start with solving the Kashmir conflict, with its origins in the botched partition with India, an act of 'sheer ineptitude and cynical abandonment…more hit-and-run than divide-and-rule'.[27] One key, if often unstated, strategic imperative for the international mission in Afghanistan was in ensuring that Pakistan did not become more radicalised as a consequence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That issue remains important today, while the prospect of a nuclear-armed, fundamentalist, highly populous Pakistan remains a frightening prospect.

If Afghanistan sees its problems through a Pakistani lens, Pakistan sees its problems through an Indian lens. Pakistan has constantly been fascinated with what kind of government in Kabul will be more or less friendly to Delhi. This requires finding a way to frame the need for stability in Afghanistan as more favourable to Islamabad's interests than a Taliban regime.

Swaran Singh, professor of conflict studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi argues that 'the only way Pakistan can be discouraged from such self-defeating pursuits [as controlling politics in Afghanistan through the use of terrorism] is if it can feel secure within its territory, for which it must stop seeking parity with India and appreciate their asymmetric relationship and act accordingly.'[28]

Despite Pakistan's apparent dysfunction (including its role in state-sponsored radicalism) and its stark economic inequality, the country 'remains a modernizing nation with a vast, breathtakingly talented middle class and diaspora. If the army and ISI did not misrule Pakistan, in alliance with corrupt political cronies, the country's potential to lift up its own population and contribute positively to the international system might today rival India's.'[29] The World Bank has estimated, for example, that improved relations through managing tariff barriers between India and Pakistan could alone lift annual bilateral trade from $2 billion to $37 billion.[30]

The diplomatic answer probably lies, however, in keeping India out of the process as much as possible to give Pakistan the security it seeks, recognising that Islamabad has legitimate strategic interests that have to be protected. While Pakistan has to accept that Afghanistan is a sovereign country that will not be 'outsourced' to them, as one diplomat put it, Kabul will have to do a deal on the border, recognising the 1893 Durand Line. Of course, there is more to regional diplomacy than Pakistan. Afghanistan's other neighbours—Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—are, or should be, aware of their stake in stability, and potentially greater stake in prosperity.

First Vice President Amrullah Saleh was, before his government's fall, open about admitting the Afghan Republic's 'lost opportunities', particularly those squandered by President Karzai after the surge of 2009–14, 'since it was an opportunity to rebuild Afghanistan' in the process 'overestimating the American resilience, patience and generosity. That was a mistake.'

But US support for Pakistan, about $1 billion a year in military assistance alone and despite seemingly incontrovertible evidence of support for the Taliban, was more perplexing to the former Northern Alliance intelligence chief. When Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Kabul, Saleh says Khan asked him if he would prefer to kill the Taliban or reconcile with them? 'I said the latter,' said the Vice President. 'But I asked Khan, you have one-third of your hospitals in Quetta occupied by the Taliban, why? Why are your imports of ammonium nitrate so high? Why are there government backed Madrassas supplying support to the Taliban? Why are all the Taliban leaders in Pakistan?'

But for Saleh, the greatest puzzle was the West's unchanging relationship with Pakistan. 'Is the US afraid of Pakistan, or is Pakistan too hot to handle, or is Afghanistan an expendable ally? Because the US knows that without Pakistan's support for the Taliban, the war would be over in six months,' he says. 'The US sits on a treasure of intelligence which shows that the Taliban is backed and managed by Pakistan, yet,' he asked, 'they call it an Afghan problem?'

* * *

In February 2021, referring to the former US Secretary of State during Vietnam, President Ghani asked, 'What would Kissinger do?' The answer is moot perhaps, but it would most likely involve a clear separation of the issues, the discipline of detail, working backwards from objectives to negotiating positions, and clear linkages between core interests and these positions. 'Pakistan should be encouraged to look on us not as a backward colony but as a source of connectivity,' said the President, stressing Afghanistan's linkages with Central Asian economies. Predictability on the part of its external partners is necessary for success, he notes, which was not the case during the Trump presidency, which was 'random and improvised'.

Henry Kissinger himself writes that while it was not possible to turn Afghanistan into a modern democracy, creative diplomacy and force might have overcome terrorism.[31] The failures of the COIN surge, Kissinger says, were a result of America's 'inability to define attainable goals and to link them in a way that is sustainable by the American political process'. While regional powers, including India, China, Russia and Pakistan, often had divergent interests, he notes, 'a creative diplomacy might have distilled common measures for overcoming terrorism in Afghanistan. This strategy is how Britain defended the land approaches to India across the Middle East for a century without permanent bases but permanent readiness to defend its interests, together with ad hoc regional supporters.'

'When history is written,' foretold the Pakistani spymaster Hamid Gul in 2014, it will record that 'the ISI, with the help of America, defeated America.'[32] As tempting as the thought of Pakistan playing gatekeeper to Afghanistan in order to deny that territory to its archrival India may be for Pakistan, its victory of 2021 will likely be a pyrrhic one, risking disruption to its socially fragile, nuclear-armed, poverty-stricken, divided and radicalising powder-keg at home, a combination of factors it is already struggling to contain.[33]

The prospect of millions of Afghan refugees crossing its borders and the gloves coming off in its relationship with Russia, Iran and India, to name but three geo-political regional rivals, would be an enormous burden, especially without the flow of US support to and through Pakistan on which Islamabad has come to depend.

In this context, many Pakistanis (though few intelligence officers) might be surprised to hear how unpopular Pakistan is with the Taliban. In three

conversations in 2009 and 2011, one of us spent several hours listening to extended rants against Islamabad from multiple Taliban interlocutors. Pakistan is not a real country, they said, pointing out that 'everyone east of the Indus River is ethnically Indian, and everyone west of the river—except for the Baluch, and they don't count—is an Afghan.' These Taliban leaders, who had lived in Pakistan for years, said that the worst thing about the war was having to deal with the Pakistanis.

For centuries, they said (referring to the Ghaznavid empire which ruled northwest India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries) 'we ruled these people, and now they treat us like dogs.' India's natural western frontier, one pointed out, is the Indus River ('that's why it's called India') which today runs through the centre of Pakistan. Likewise, the Indus is the natural eastern frontier of Afghanistan, and was so until the Sikhs and British invaded the area in the mid-nineteenth century.

'Pakistan', another said, 'is as legitimate a country as East Germany—it will eventually go away, and the natural order of things will be India, then Pashtunistan, then a greater Tajikistan.'[34] The notion, therefore, that an incoming Taliban government might agree to a permanent recognition of the Durand Line or abandon the long-held dream of Pashtunistan is perhaps rather fanciful, whatever its pragmatic need for a relationship with Pakistan.

Whatever the reasons for Western political leaders' inaction on Pakistan —its nuclear status, relationship with China, counterbalance to Iran, a pathological weakness for charming dictators with a 'modernist veneer' in their rule of 'exotic, dangerous lands',[35] or their own isolationist impulses —the preference of multiple US administrations to kick the can down the road rather than engage with the problem of Pakistan does matter. The absence of progress on regional political initiatives, and the resulting persistence of the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan, have made progress in Afghanistan extraordinarily hard to achieve.

Resolving this complex set of issues will ultimately demand greater alignment between the ruling class in Pakistan and the rest of the country. 'Islamabad: only half an hour from Pakistan' goes the saying among foreign diplomats who are scathing of its imperious outlook.

The torpor of the capital and its methods scarcely reflect the dynamism of the country and its people, as epitomised by the skills and ingenuity of Pakistanis at home and, especially, abroad.[36] Since the India-Pakistan relationship is probably beyond redemption for the foreseeable future, the

most realistic path for positive change is a move towards a politically dominated army instead of an army-dominated political situation. The 'Deep State' that has dominated Pakistan for decades has 'steered her into the most perilous waters', taking the country to war, running rigged elections, perverting the media, relentlessly instrumentalising radical Islam to strengthen its grip on power, and making bad laws while breaking good ones.[37]

The Corruption of Recovery

> *'The challenge is that the Taliban is so obsessed with the cookie that no one has been able to divert their attention to the pie—the larger economic dividend if we can agree to a pluralistic system. They are too narrowly focused to see the pie. For it not to become a fight over booty, we need a vision and international commitment.'*
>
> First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, Afghanistan, February 2021

At the conclusion of a meeting that one of us had in 2010 with Spin Boldak's border police generalissimo Abdul Raziq, his aide walked across the large room and turned on the satellite television. Up popped a programme on hair care products for South Asians, known as 'Zing Hottie'. Its presenters were just that, contrasting markedly with the meeting next door with Pashtun elders, and with the scene just down the road at Weish, a dusty, busy frontier town, termed Raziqistan on account of the long and sinuous reach of the then Afghan Border Police (ABP) chief's security and business tentacles. This was an analogy for the Janus-faced nature of politics in Afghanistan: one immediate game of diplomacy and dragons to be played out with donors and another, more serious, longer-term game with local actors.

That April in 2010, Raziq was in loose control of the border area from Nimroz province near Iran on the far southwest, to Zabul in the East. He was clearly revered by the 3,700 ABP men under his command. Then only thirty-three years old, he had been anointed into the job through a combination of tribe and circumstance, and promoted a year later to Provincial Chief of Police (PCOP) for Kandahar province itself. A power-broker—i.e. warlord—of some note, dancing between our meeting and the

one next-door with village elders and maliks (chiefs), he provided security, of a sort, to Spin and its surrounding areas.

His diplomacy told a story of the layered, complex identities and interest groups he had to navigate in order to access the patronage he needed to ensure local support, while greasing the wheels of local government, however wobbly they may have been, and keeping the international community on board.

The border at Weish, several kilometres outside Spin, is notable for a Champs Élysées -styled 'Friendship Gate'. Allegedly positioned 700 metres in the wrong place in a fit of Pakistani nationalism, it has not been officially recognised by the Afghans. Traffic skirts its edges via a single lane for vehicles, with travel only permitted in groups of ten vehicles in one direction at a time in and out of Afghanistan.

Pedestrians move in a separate, fenced-in lane, while donkey-carts, bicycles, small boys carrying heavy sacks, tractors over-laden with wood, kindling, mats, and just about any other item one could imagine including the ubiquitous Afghan green plastic jugs, flow chaotically in and out. People and carts are plentiful because the rules, enthusiastically administered by Pakistani police, among others, with their snapping whips, allow pedestrians and animal-drawn vehicles to avoid tariffs and taxes because of their (small) size. A plethora of rules and procedures give officials plenty of opportunity for discretionary institutionalised and individual 'taxation'.

On the day we visited Weish, drivers of jingly trucks told us about the problems they faced. In interviews, Pakistani truckers complained mostly about road conditions in their own country, and about the number of bribes they had to pay to police and 'militants'.[38]

Drivers from Quetta, just eight hours away, were paying up to 5,000 Pakistani rupees (then $60) in bribes, eliminating much of their profit. For those moving potatoes from Quetta, for example, the 25,000 rupee ($300) payment for the journey had to include fuel (6,000 rupees), tolls (2,000 rupees), and bribes (5,000 rupees), leaving just 12,000 rupees profit. As one driver put it, gesticulating with his trigger finger, 'I have to pay because they have a rifle.' Militants would break their windscreens if they did not cough up, while fuel theft was also not uncommon.

Pakistani political mendacity, grounded in the country's perennially conflicted relationship with India as discussed above, was matched only by

its predatory police and their freelance economic practices. Pakistan, along with Dubai and others, and including security, services and construction companies in donor nations themselves, were the principal beneficiaries of the gush of aid and military expenditure in Afghanistan. It was never intended to be only for Afghans.

A 2008 Oxfam/ACBAR aid assessment estimated that 40% of aid returns to donor countries in profits and salaries.[39] Businessmen from Kandahar told one of us the same year that 'we call it aeroplane aid, because it flies to Afghanistan from donor countries, touches down briefly, then flies right back home again' in the form of consultant fees and payments to contractors from donor countries.[40] More than that, aid practices could contribute to worsening governance problems.

The drivers' other complaints centred on the small size of the trans-loading area on the Afghan side of the border. Trucks from Karachi took five to seven days for the journey on average, though some fuel trucks could take as long as sixteen, which seemed partly due to their poor mechanical state, and partly to extra security precautions. Afghan drivers universally reported that while the Afghan National Army (ANA) did not solicit bribes, the Afghan National Police (ANP) did, demanding 400–600 Afghani (at the time, $8–12) at each checkpoint en route to Kandahar.

All complained about International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) traffic and patrols forcing them off the road, and customs delays. Most returned empty to Pakistan, reinforcing the view of traders as to how little Afghanistan produced and exported. This dead-heading—something any professional transport contractor avoids like the plague—literally doubled the cost of trucking.

These were not just academic problems: they directly affected Afghanistan's ability to develop, to get rich by selling across borders. According to the UN Development Program (UNDP), landlocked countries like Afghanistan comprise ten of the twenty countries with the lowest level of human development. In 2010, the world's thirty-one landlocked developing countries accounted for less than one percent of global trade. In some of these countries, transport costs can exceed 70% of export value, a far bigger barrier to trade than tariffs.[41]

To delve more deeply into these constraints along the route, two of us travelled on Saturday 24 April 2010 from Spin Boldak to Kandahar with a

convoy of nineteen vehicles, on a tanker truck carrying 45,000 litres of aviation fuel.

* * *

Leaving Kandahar base at 2:30am, we drove the 50km from the trucking compound to the Vehicle Holding Area north of Spin in one of 16 Toyota 'Surf' security trucks. As reassuring as their presence may have been, personal security detachments (PSDs) imposed costs for other traffic on the road (and the road was very busy by the time of the return journey at midday), because of their magnetic attraction for insurgents and the image they projected of insecurity. PSDs were thus, at best, a double-edged sword.

The tanker truck averaged just 18.8 kph through the journey. It moved faster downhill than up, an indication of road-worthiness despite the best efforts of its driver Sherafzal and his assistant Zamidor. That Zamidor was able to run alongside the truck for much of the way gave an idea of its condition. The slowest (flat-out) speed uphill was 5 kph, even though the road surface was reasonable throughout.

With Pakistani music crackling on the stereo, our hyper-flammable load was never far from the mind, heightened by the cigarette always dangling from Sherafzal's lips, and the 'gloep-gloep' sloshing noises behind us. We went through ten Afghan police (ABP and ANP) checkpoints *en route*. While there was no open bribe-taking, just north of Spin Boldak we passed a group of 113 trucks, all carrying shipping containers, queuing at a post. The ISAF contractor's fixer explained they were paying an 'informal toll' at that point of 5,000 Afghanis ($100). The translator explained this was to 'pay the commander', a common form of taxation where each police post has a price tag attached to it, given the relationship between authority and income.[42] A percentage of this income would trickle up to Abdul Raziq and eventually to the President, Hamid Karzai. That's how the system worked: everyone had a stake.

The principal Host Nation Transport (HNT) contract to support ISAF totalled $2.16 billion in 2010,[43] providing 70% of the supplies consumed by US troops in the field. The 6,000 to 8,000 truck missions monthly worked out at over $25,000 per truck per mission. Although, in 2010, there were eight prime contractors, the actual missions were sub-contracted to others, many of whom had government connections, creating a political economy

nothing short of deadly for the economic and governance practices needed to ensure long-term recovery.

Commander Ruhallah, for example, who dominated the security business along Highway One (between Kabul and Kandahar), guarded 3,500 trucks per month at up to $1,500 per truck. He contracted Watan Risk Management, a firm closely connected to Kandahari power broker Ahmad Wali Karzai, half-brother of President Karzai, and run by Ahmed Rateb Popal and Rashid Popal, two of Karzai's cousins.

Matiullah Khan was a leading security provider in Uruzgan Province, north of Kandahar, his 2,000-strong militia controlling the highway between Kandahar and Tarin Kot, Uruzgan's capital. He reportedly charged $1,500–$3,000 per truck to pass through 'his' road. Trucking thus offered the ultimate, lucrative protection racket. In a pattern that has been around as long as there have been roads in this part of the world, ISAF contracting officers were essentially buying security from the very people who threatened to attack them if they didn't.[44]

These trips taught that the freedom-of-movement constraints that the international community could most easily fix were the tactics of its own patrols and those of private contractors. Fixing these would not only have eased travel but simultaneously reduced perceptions of risk.

For Afghan drivers and business, another challenge related to load factors. For every ten loads into Afghanistan only one full one came out. An agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan allowing trucks to carry goods across borders regardless of nationality would have helped balance this lop-sidedness. Still, Afghanistan's development and security trajectory depends, as in every other country, on what it can make and sell to a greater extent than today. The obstacle was not security per se; it was the system that produced insecurity.

Instead of making long-term investments in productive areas of the economy, the political economy in Afghanistan during Western occupation focused on plunder—on short-term, income-generating opportunities for personal benefit, on consumption rather than production, extortion rather than taxation. The culture of patronage started at the top. People passed payments up to the leadership and cut down to their tribe. Or as an Afghan official put it in 2010: 'It is impossible to separate the Taliban from the power-brokers and the government. They make money in it together. It is nothing less than a mafia.'[45]

This became the Afghan operating system, an engine of corruption and abuse fuelled by the international delivery of security and development. There were many causes of this: from punitive bribery imposed on the local population, to rentier elites benefiting from security, logistics and other contracts. But mostly it arose because of an absence of government vision, policy and plans for governance and development, and—most importantly—the absence of rule of law. Instead of focusing on creating economic absorptive capacity, successive Afghan governments and international agencies were preoccupied with ensuring security and distributing the profits. Hence the focus on foreign relations (for continued aid) and local patronage and politics (to maintain control). In this, both the power-brokers and the Taliban were intent on creating demand for their services: acting as 'conflict entrepreneurs' setting the circumstances that allowed them a role pursuing rent-seeking and revenue-creating opportunities, a traditional Afghan form of racketeering—yet one that involved international players, civil and military, just as much.

Such a system of abusive checkpoints and arbitrary taxes was exactly why the Taliban had been welcomed by some local communities when they first arose, around Kandahar, in 1994, as a means of stopping the warlords' depredations. But after taking control of Kabul in 1996 the Taliban soon learnt where the money was, imposing an import tax on anything brought into the country. By 1998 they controlled all major airports and border crossings; companies faced a 50% tax, and those who failed to pay up faced closure or worse. Ironically, one of the worst mujahideen abusers, whose trial and execution for corruption was one of the Taliban's early public-relations successes on their road to power, had been Abdul Raziq's own uncle, the infamous Spin Boldak militia leader and local warlord Mansour Raziq Achakzai.

The Taliban hanged Mansour Raziq in 1994; naturally enough, seven years later when the incoming American forces overthrew the Taliban and put Mansour's nephew Abdul Raziq in charge of the Spin Boldak police post, local people got the message. 'The system that was brought in,' observed Ashraf Ghani's national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib, 'was a contradiction from the outset.'

International partners wanted a system, he notes, that put women's rights, transparency, accountability and openness at the centre. 'But then we were left at the mercy and behest of the corrupt warlords, in business and

government. As Afghanistan grew, this contradiction snowballed as the warlords got richer and more powerful and became more invested in the government and the system.' As a result, 'fighting corruption now is like trying to clean a muddy river… very difficult to do'.[46]

Afghanistan operates no differently in this respect from other states—notably some in Africa—along the lines of Bayart's 'politics of the belly', a lust for power along racial, tribal, party, and familial lines, with patronage being the key mechanism (and reason) for delivery. In this system, government and business elites use their positions and influence to enrich themselves, families or kinsmen. It is one where 'material prosperity…is one of the chief political virtues rather than being an object of disapproval,'[47] and 'legitimacy is firmly embedded in the patrimonial practices of patrons and their networks.'[48]

Corruption is institutionalised, as politics—like wealth—is held closely in the family. Everything from policing appointments through to investigations and prosecutions becomes highly politicised since political elites make these appointments, putting the leaders who make them above the law.

Of course, there were good practical reasons for bringing in players such as Raziq at the outset of the war. Peace would have been hard to make without the warlords inside the tent, part of the fabric of government. Doing so imposed a long-term cost, no doubt, but there seemed little alternative at the time, given the light military footprint and the laser-like focus of military forces on the ongoing hunt for Osama bin Laden. It seemed cleaner, to some US commanders and political leaders, to simply hand control over Afghanistan to the most anti-Taliban actors around, delegate reconstruction to the UN and international participants at the Bonn Conference and concentrate US efforts on counter-terrorism.

Of course, the most anti-Taliban actors around were the warlords, who had been fighting the Taliban since their first appearance, and they were in no mood for peace or magnanimity. They persecuted every Taliban leader they could find and went right back to their extractive abuse of the population. Once the warlords were back in power, it became politically risky (though not impossible) to cut them out. Western donors preferred, with one or two notable exceptions, not to upset fragile politics by following the money and seeking points of political leverage.[49] Coalition commanders often preferred working with warlords, whose anti-Taliban

motivations were clear and sincere, making them trustworthy partners—albeit partners whose abusive behaviour progressively alienated the people more and more over time.

A key lesson from the intervention and international investment in Afghanistan after 9/11 is thus the need for external stakeholders to understand fully what they are getting into. Is it a war when you can pay off warlords not to attack your logistics convoys? Are these costs acceptable with the greater aim in mind? Can you knit strands of governance together with international assistance, and can that assistance, in turn, be integrated carefully enough through political pressure and facilitation, military means, development and humanitarian assistance? A clearer understanding of where power and influence lay could have helped to align individuals and local power brokers behind an Afghan national strategy.

This could have avoided the frankly ridiculous situation in which the person who held the franchise for TGI Fridays, the boardwalk restaurant at Kandahar Airbase where we enjoyed our (non-alcoholic) pre-mission drinks before the fuel tanker route diagnostic, was also funding and fuelling the conflict. This spoke volumes about the lack of seriousness of the Afghan government in settling the conflict, rather than simply profiting from it.

But the warlords were not the only 'conflict entrepreneurs'—actors who benefit from the continuation of a war and therefore seek to prolong rather than win it—in town.[50] Many members of Afghanistan's rentier elite, along with the Afghan government, its international partners and the enormous buzzing swarm of contractors, consultants and implementing partners were feeding at the same trough.

Two decades after the fall of the Taliban, the continuous violence and the deteriorating grip of the government led to Afghanistan being described as 'unwinnable' or 'endless', its dysfunction supposedly innate to the region's history or cultures, and thus beyond the capacity of any outsider to improve.[51] Such cultural reductionism is misleading. As Steve Coll notes,

> Independent Afghanistan was impoverished but peaceful and stable, untroubled by radical international violence for many decades of the twentieth century, prior to the Soviet invasion of 1979. Its several decades of civil war since that invasion have been fuelled again and again by outside interference, primarily by Pakistan, but certainly including the United States and Europe,

> which have remade Afghanistan with billions of dollars in humanitarian and reconstruction aid while simultaneously contributing to its violence, corruption, and instability.[52]

Whereas Afghanistan had in the past been able to enjoy peace when everyone and every group 'got a bit', the carefully balanced system of distribution and redistribution that had evolved over centuries was upended by the Communist seizure of power in the 1970s, disrupted by the Russian occupation, scrambled by the civil war of the 1990s and comprehensively wrecked by the influx of arrogant, ignorant foreigners, cashed-up and armed to the teeth, after 9/11.

The problem all along was that the West pursued a series of short-term imperatives, centred on removing the Taliban, countering terrorism and setting up representative government, but these were not linked to a longer-term, integrated strategic undertaking. Fixated on where it was rather than where it wanted to be, the coalition instead attempted to reverse-engineer a strategy from facts on the ground, a hopeless methodology that made an ignominious withdrawal much more likely.

* * *

Being police chief of Kandahar province was an exceedingly dangerous occupation, though this was a risk Abdul Raziq knew well. The Taliban had hanged his uncle and father in 1994, and two of his predecessors had been assassinated. Having survived more than thirty attempts on his life, he ran out of luck in his own compound, being killed by a lone gunman at close range while walking with colleagues and the visiting American commander, General Scotty Miller, in October 2018.[53] Raziq's death highlighted the critical relationship between the political system and economic opportunities.

Over twenty years, beset by conflict entrepreneurs, Afghanistan failed utterly to transition from a war to a peace economy. Instead the spoils of the war economy incentivised its continuation and fragmented political unity. Coupled with ignorance of local politics, the international community's short-termism fuelled corruption and nepotism, cemented extraction as the operating system, and ensured that patron-client relationships routinely trumped the rule of law.

Judgements favouring stability over good governance, made in 2001 by international actors for understandable reasons, involved accommodating corruption and abusive behaviour by any sufficiently anti-Taliban actor, undermining trust and justice and destroying popular support. The disunity worsened as the international exit date loomed, and local actors manoeuvred to establish alternative networks and income streams. The problem all along was that the West never had a strategy to fix Afghanistan: rather, the coalition had a plan to get rid of the Taliban and then continuously sought a means to withdraw, never to fix the country.

The Failure of Economic Development

> *'The return of the international community [on its aid to Afghanistan] has been very poor. I would be very angry if I was them. I would look closely at my partners.'*
>
> Afghan Chief of Police, FOB Walton,September 2010

'We've got to electrify rural Vietnam,' President Lyndon Johnson once observed. 'People are all the same under the sun.'[54]

LBJ may have shown a remarkably theatrical, even populist, touch for public relations, but there was no silver bullet solution for Vietnam's challenges. The same is true for Afghanistan or any other fragile society, where development challenges are greatly amplified by violence. The fact that these countries receive aid, yet rarely succeed in controlling violence, is an indication that a systematic response is necessary.

The flow of development money to Afghanistan started slowly, but the trickle soon turned to a torrent. By 2010, at the peak of international involvement during President Obama's COIN surge, the international community was spending more than $100 billion on in-kind military and other assistance per year in Afghanistan. This included more than $10 billion in development aid annually, amounting to $333 per Afghan man, woman and child per year. In some areas, such as the restive southern provinces, the concentration was much higher.

Yet given the lack of impact—measured by the non-existence of any real economy outside of that supported by donor money—it may have been better (and considerably more efficient) simply to bomb the country with bundles of cash. 'Aid expenditure in Afghanistan is highly distributive,'

said one USAID official in Kabul in 2010. ‘There is too much money. It is so gross in its volume that the effort is mostly to disperse it rather than disperse it in a wise, sustainable way.’[55]

Of course, not every Afghan received this aid. Much of it went into just a few hands, or was spent on consumptive rather than productive areas of investment aimed at expanding business and creating jobs. A 2008 Oxfam/ACBAR assessment showed that one-third of aid was unaccounted for by the Afghan government and just 40% of technical assistance was co-ordinated with its ministries. Less than 10% of the figure of military expenditure was dedicated to development and humanitarian aid, over half of aid was tied to donor goods and services, two-thirds of aid bypassed the Afghan government, and profit margins on reconstruction projects could be as high as 50%. Full-time consultant salaries in Afghanistan for expats could be, the report noted, as high as $500,000 per annum.[56] ‘Aeroplane aid’, indeed.

Things improved only very slowly. While apportioning more blame to the donors than the recipients, the Oxfam/Swedish Committee for Afghanistan report of March 2018 on aid effectiveness concludes with the understatement: ‘A great deal of aid money has been poorly spent in the country’. Unsurprisingly, the international community was, at least during the Karzai period, seen by many not to be uplifting Afghans *per se*, but rather creating an environment that benefited a small political dynasty.

The challenge goes beyond elite depredation, however. Afghanistan’s difficulties are acutely representative of a broader problem: how to spend aid money wisely and how to measure its effects. Some of the issue in Afghanistan was because of a slow start, with the US being reluctant—as the opening quote from President Bush illustrates—to embark on nation-building, perhaps mindful of the lessons of Vietnam and, more recently, Somalia and the Balkans. Some of it was due to a lack of absorptive capacity, and the fact that Afghanistan had been truly ‘unplugged’ in every way as a consequence of ten years of the Soviet-Afghan war, the chaos and wanton destruction of the civil war period, and the deliberate autarky of the Taliban from 1996. As Steve Coll observes of the situation in 2002,

> The international airport had no air traffic control systems to speak about. Only satellite phones could be relied upon for voice communication. Gasoline and diesel had to be flown in by the

> barrel. The Taliban had squatted inside ministry buildings. They cooked on the floor and slept in offices. Sections of the city destroyed by street-to-street tank and rocket battles during the civil war still lay in ruins. After Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance, the Panjshiris and their Uzbek and Hazara allies had rushed from building to building, reoccupying lost property or seizing abandoned compounds. The armed militias created an unstable patchwork of policing and checkpoints from block to block.[57]

Even so, the scale of the aid agencies' failure and wastage in Afghanistan shocked even hardened donor bureaucrats. Many projects were antithetical to long-term development; at best, they were sacrifices in the cause of stability. Often the domestic or strategic imperative to shove money out the door trumped the need to spend it carefully and wisely. Not only was there a massive brain drain from the non-aid economy as qualified and skilled locals flocked to donor salaries (which, as a rule, were about twice as high for managerial roles in Kabul as in business), but 'business people' manoeuvred to feed off the aid economy.[58] Not only did this create a culture of dependency, but the grand contracts that came with $1 trillion in donor and military expenditure undermined good governance and fuelled corruption and violence, as shown by the logistics contracts highlighted above.

Some of the poor quality and misdirected expenditure in Afghanistan was, as Ahmed Rashid suggests, a product of security imperatives, such as the need to create a positive impact, as in Helmand province where there was spending on multiple seed programmes, as explained below, or the country-wide spending on warlord trucking contracts. Some of its was because there was no overarching plan. 'The billions [claimed in aid] were not spent in Afghanistan,' says Amrullah Saleh. 'For example, the vehicle maintenance contracts we currently have, comprise probably 80% management costs, and 10% each for spare parts and Afghan labour. I don't criticise [the donors] for this, but rather the lack of a plan for anyone. We lacked co-ordination.'

Some of it was just down to misguided theory and ideology, such as the agricultural programmes that promoted vegetable-growing as an alternative to poppies. This, as one US counter-narcotics specialist put it, 'had none of the advantages of opium, which would last forever, and someone would

collect it and pay cash. Instead, vegetables had to get to market quickly, and might never be sold'.[59] The entire poppy eradication programme was probably counter-productive, and driven, it would seem, less by pragmatism than by political (and it seemed a certain religious or ideological) zeal. Rather, said a State Department official, 'The model should be that adopted by the software business: you need to define the situation and the problem, then the end-state and its benefits. And then map out the process as to how to get from A to B.'

All this sounds logical. If you don't get the economy working, the argument went, you won't be able to stabilise the country, no matter how successful the security project is. As noted in Chapter One, this is actually the reverse of John Paul Vann's operationally proven dictum that security comes first. But in any case, getting the economy going implies understanding something about the economy and an analysis unhampered by either ignorance or ideological hang-ups.

Instead of a longer-term development approach, Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) became a favourite tool of delivery, intended to convince the population of progress on reconstruction although in practice they merely consolidated power among the warlords rather than solidifying the control of the government in Kabul. The commitment to rebuilding government capacity encouraged overlap in projects, undermining any sense of local ownership, and detracting from things that could have changed the path for Afghanistan, including roads and electricity, services for fast-growing urban areas, and agriculture. When the US and its allies finally woke up to the scale of the challenge and began attempting to deliver 'accelerated success' a full five years after the fall of the Taliban, it was too little and probably already too late.

Overall Rashid condemns the early approach to rebuilding Afghanistan as the 'path of least construction'. He is particularly unimpressed with the role of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), the novel means used by ISAF to extend security and governance countrywide.[60]

For the first two years after the fall of the Taliban, ISAF remained a rather small force of just 5,000 located mostly in Kabul and a few bigger cities in the east and southeast of the country. Both the UN and Hamid Karzai proposed an extension of ISAF to the entire country. PRTs were essentially a means to spread the ISAF security effect without expanding ISAF troop numbers.[61] The concept originated in early 2002 through the

Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLC) programme, otherwise known as 'Chiclets'—outposts manned by army officers to assess humanitarian needs and implement small-scale reconstruction projects as an extension of security and stability operations. By the end of that year, the cells expanded to include other government representatives and a security element and were renamed PRTs.

General Sir Nick Carter wrote the original brief for the PRTs in 2002. 'They were designed to act as a gearing mechanism between central government and the regions. Originally, they focused on DDR [Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration], and development was then blistered onto their role.' General Carter later served as commander of ISAF forces in Kandahar in 2010, as Deputy Commander of ISAF in 2012, then Chief of the General Staff (the professional head of the British Army) and, from 2017, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).

The PRTs had ancestors in earlier counter-insurgency campaigns, notably Vietnam and Algeria. The *Sections Administratives Specialisées* created by France in Algeria and the US Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) were somewhat similar in concept. CORDS, with its Revolutionary Development Cadres, for example, included USAID experts, as did the PRTs. All were intent on winning hearts and minds. The ISAF PRT Handbook describes the PRT as 'a civil-military institution that is able to penetrate the more unstable and insecure areas because of its military component and is able to stabilise these areas because of the combined capabilities of its diplomacy, military, and economic components.'[62]

Initially US-funded and directed, other countries soon took ownership of PRTs, including New Zealand, Britain, Norway, Spain, Canada, Lithuania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Sweden, Turkey and Germany. By 2008 there were twenty-six PRTs across Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces.[63] Although Australia deployed a full-scale Reconstruction Task Force in Uruzgan based on an Engineer Regiment with extensive supporting assets, the average PRT was considerably smaller, with usually between 100–25 personnel.

Most PRTs were led by military officers and were designed to deliver both force protection and small, quick impact reconstruction and assistance operations. The strategic aim was to reinforce the authority and legitimacy of the Afghan government, extend its reach at the provincial and district

levels, develop governance and infrastructure, and provide a measure of economic and social stability and security. Hence the civilian staff usually included civilian agriculture and other development experts.[64]

The degree of civil-military cooperation varied dramatically between PRTs—both from nation to nation and from rotation to rotation. The fact that each PRT covered a province, and each was sponsored by a troop-contributing nation, meant that the varying abilities and enthusiasm of national leadership came with the turf. It also meant that nations tended to focus on high-profile aid programmes within their provinces, bolstering their credentials as contributing members of the coalition, rather than on longer-term, lower-visibility issues of greater importance.

Some PRTs were better endowed than others, though all faced the same vexing problem: how best to improve governance and in so doing, strengthen the legitimacy of the government. The problem in extending governance in Afghanistan was—and is—that there is little tradition of central authority, and little evidence that the local elites (be they warlords or drug-smugglers) would accept their role without resistance.

One of us, talking with a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) officer in 2008, ventured to suggest that the Kandahar PRT might focus more on governance reform and rule of law, on cleaning up the legendarily corrupt Kandahari elite, before seeking to extend the reach of the Afghan government into areas that were currently doing perfectly well without it. The CIDA officer shook her head. ‘The mission, and the only mission, we have here is to strengthen the Afghan government and extend its reach.’ It was pointless to argue that, in extending the reach of a corrupt and abusive government before trying to reform it, we might be making the problem worse not better: she had her orders.[65]

The Marshall Plan worked in Europe at the end of the Second World War because it drew on centuries-old institutional traditions of local and regional governments that were obeyed. Instead, in Afghanistan, there is a strong tradition of resisting rule from the centre, despite 150 years of assiduous attempts to do so. Even an effective, centralised military structure was insufficient to this task, both in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. Thus, not only did the PRTs face the challenge of translating high-level plans into practical effect, they had to do so in a way that provided an ‘Afghan face’ to projects so as to instil a sense of local ownership, even in

tasks where the government was reluctant to participate, such as in tackling corruption.

Yet without cleaning up governance and ending the culture of impunity, the international community risked being tainted by the government's failure. The resulting alienation of the population drove a cycle of corruption, abuse, resentment and increased support for the resistance movement.

General Carter observes in this light that 'aid was successful in Afghanistan when it was applied to local political solutions…Our big challenge [in the important districts around Kandahar City] was to connect the population to governance. That…involved getting Afghan elders to stay in their communities…and to make them feel sufficiently secure to act in their traditional capacities as leaders of the local populations.

'To enable them to do this, it was important to have some money to lubricate the system and to give them the ability to reinforce some of their local decisions with resources—typically small irrigation projects, or fertiliser, or something that went with the grain of local solutions. Conversely, I found that if aid was liberally distributed in significant quantities there was a grave risk that it could drive the sort of behaviours in corruption and impunity terms that frankly fed the insurgency, separated the people from governance and fed a culture of warlordism that ultimately undermined our position and enabled the Taliban's position.'[66]

The same problems existed with PRTs, which had their roots in the post-2004 shift in focus from defeating the Taliban to nation-building. 'The problem was that they were distributed to different nations,' observes General Carter, 'with different interpretations of what they should do. And no-one had an idea as to how to knit together a relationship with Afghans, with the result that there were parallel worlds: PRT activity and local interests. This led to corruption and the absence of effect.'

Colonel (later Major General) Dickie Davis established the PRT in Mazar e-Sharif in 2003.[67] 'When they were set up in 2003, they could have done a lot of good. Then Iraq happened, and the golden hour of post-conflict development passed by.' In 2006, ISAF attempted to expedite development through the creation of Policy Action Groups (PAGs) focusing attention on key areas, known as Afghan Development Zones (ADZs). 'The thinking was correct,' reminds Major General Davis, 'as it was applying conventional counter-insurgency theory to the problem. But by then, a lot of

people were playing a very difficult game.' Expediting more and more funding via the PRTs, the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations or the ADZs was simply going to compound the problems of corruption and governance that had already surfaced.[68]

In accordance with the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement signed by presidents Karzai and Obama in May 2012, PRTs were phased out by the end of 2014, as the counter-insurgency phase of the campaign ended. Karzai had earlier accused foreign reconstruction teams of undermining efforts to build up the state's institutions, saying that the PRTs were like a parallel system of government, and they would have to go and hand over their facilities to the Afghan government.[69]

In addition to the PRTs, there were more than 300 ISAF Forward Operating Bases (FOBs), Combat Outposts (COPs), camps, firebases and other military installation in Afghanistan at the peak of the surge, all of them essentially fortified areas, all delivering a measure of aid and security. Indeed, the volumes of assistance—military, developmental and humanitarian—delivered to Afghanistan were staggering. Yet, for the majority of Afghanistan's 35 million people the living situation remains much the same as if none of this money had ever been spent, which is to say tough verging on desperate.

While economic growth averaged 12% in the 2000s, peaking at 18% in 2009, it fell to 0.5% by 2019.[70] Much of it was also Kabul-centric. As a result, by the end of 2020, more than half of the population still lived below the poverty line. Unemployment was then estimated to be at least 40%, and the average annual income in 2019 was $585, a decline since 2013.[71] Close to 90% of Afghan women and girls are reported to suffer from at least one form of abuse, including physical or psychological violence, and 70–80% face forced marriage, many before the age of sixteen.[72]

Afghanistan imported eight times more than it (officially, excluding narcotics) exported. Government revenues were under $2.5 billion in 2019, while expenditure was over $5 billion.

The sustainability of this situation was hugely problematic, as discussed in the next chapter. It was compounded by the huge expenditure (estimated at $4.5 billion annually) required to keep the Afghan National Security Forces going, a tab picked up mostly by the US government. Thus by 2019 Afghanistan, despite enormous expenditure of aid, effort and blood, was

barely coping with a growing Taliban insurgency, and clearly incapable of standing on its own.[73]

* * *

Viewed in hindsight, Bernard Fall's insights about Vietnam are remarkable. The late Colin Powell wrote in his own autobiography: 'I recently reread Bernard Fall's book on Vietnam, *Street Without Joy*. Fall makes painfully clear that we had almost no understanding of what we had gotten ourselves into. I cannot help thinking that if President Kennedy or President Johnson had spent a quiet weekend at Camp David reading that perceptive book, they would have returned to the White House Monday morning and immediately started to figure out a way to extricate ourselves from the quicksand of Vietnam.'[74]

Now there is no excuse: the lessons are readily available. Results in counter-insurgency, Fall argued, could be measured only over many years. Success, moreover, required a capable host government that could ultimately carry the burden on its own. Fall's contemporary David Galula—a French military officer who had served in Algeria and been held prisoner by Mao's forces in China, before commanding troops on counterinsurgency operations in two different districts of Algeria—noted that victory in counter-insurgency demanded not only the military defeat of the guerrilla component of an insurgent movement, but also a permanent separation between the population and insurgent—a separation willingly undertaken in concert with a credible and legitimate government. As Galula put it, 'A victory is not (just) the destruction in a given area of the insurgent's forces and his political organization. It is that plus the permanent isolation of the insurgent from the population, isolation not enforced upon the population but maintained by and with the population.'[75]

These lessons ring true today but implementing them is as hard as ever; indeed, it may be impossible. Individuals working in reconstruction and stabilisation roles need the ability both to appreciate and draw together the strands of security, development, politics and economics, where the emphasis is on personalcharisma and cultural and local knowledge, coupled with an ability to understand the array of incentives shaping local actions, and to listen attentively rather than prescribe.

The role of political advisers (POLADs) in Afghanistan was challenging, given the absence of any clear-cut political strategy as evidenced in progress with talks, internally or regionally. The development cadres were similarly misdirected. Mistakes compound in such environments when there is so much at stake. Moreover, aid programmes can crowd out private-sector economic development when controlled by donors who do not either understand, or like, business.

Combined with a pathological tendency to analyse rather than do, attempts to create jobs in Afghanistan (as elsewhere) followed a pattern: a bright idea followed by a scoping study, normally backed up by a consultative process, an evaluation process producing a commission to conduct fieldwork to deliver a detailed report 'workshopped' along the way by various representative constituents and stakeholders, then appraised by peer reviewers in 'deep-dive longitudinal' processes. The product would then be matched by a business plan which, normally after at least one turnover of donor staff, is condemned to gather dust on a shelf, forgotten until the idea is revived later and the process starts again.[76]

Experts spoke of 'triggers', 'benchmarking', 'pillars', 'sequencing', 'goals', 'objectives', 'aims', 'principles', 'technical assistance', 'reviews', 'studies', 'workshops', 'deliverables' and 'delivery', 'capacity-building', 'value-chains', 'implementation', 'embedded support', and the ubiquitous 'consultations' and 'consultancies'. In the process little regard was paid to local attitudes, customs and constraints which not only shaped these environments but created the underlying problems in the first instance. Donors to Afghanistan quickly got into bad habits of identifying, analysing and proposing but seldom implementing solutions to obvious problems. When they did, they often fell into the trap of spending money on projects that, while they might have possessed immediate political cachet, were badly conceived from a commercial sustainability standpoint.

Bost Airport in Lashkar Gah in Helmand is a case in point. More than $50 million was expended (mostly by USAID and partly by the UK's then Department for International Development, DfID) on an airport that handled just one civilian flight a day by May 2010. The tempo of flights, by 2020, had fallen to one every second day.

Even while ISAF was there with its relative pomp and numbers, Bost was a bizarre and somewhat forlorn site, made more so by a walled area demarcating a planned agro-industrial park that sat empty on one side of the

runway, awaiting investment that seemed unlikely to ever appear without someone subsidising it, at which point it would cease to be a sustainable business. Moreover, the long-term viability of the airport was always dubious, given the massive air infrastructure (including a 3,500-metre runway) nearby at Camp Bastion, which was handed to the Afghan government in October 2014 and merged into the Afghan military's Camp Shorabak. Bastion was the largest British overseas military camp built since the Second World War, capable of housing 32,000 people.

The same had happened in Kandahar City, where, in 2010, the donor-funded Industrial Park sat largely vacant in the southwest of the city. The USAID-installed site, capable of housing 150 businesses across 33 acres, remained idle because probably the most important of all industrial services —electricity—had not been supplied. Adjacent to the park was an Indian-built cold storage facility, capable of taking 5,000 tonnes of produce. The problem was again electricity, however, and the small matter of an absence of actual produce to store. Build it, it seemed, and they wouldn't necessarily come, illustrating if nothing else that it would help to know what local businesspeople wanted first, and then act on it.

The empty business park only increased local frustrations. As a representative of the Kandahar Industrial Agency acidly put it in April 2010, 'Our meetings with donors are usually very interesting. They take lots of notes.' A full decade later, in 2020, the industrial parks in Herat, Kandahar, Mazar and Kabul were operating for only six to eight hours a day because of a lack of electricity, according to one minister, while the Bost park was 'barely functioning, perhaps at 10%'.[77]

Then there was the impact of short-term security imperatives on the long-term viability of aid programmes. By 2010 more than 37,500 southern Afghan farmers had benefitted from the Food Zone, described as an 'alternative livelihoods wheat and other seed and saplings scheme', along with a further 50,000 farmers reached under the US-funded AVIPA (Afghanistan Vouchers for Increased Productive Agriculture) seed and extension project.[78]

While alternative livelihoods programmes such as AVIPA and the Food Zone offered institutionalised governance to rural areas, bringing Kabul into contact with rural people often for the first time, they were missing the post-harvest handling, beneficiation, marketing and sales elements crucial to establishing a value chain. As an agriculture ministry official in Kabul

put it at the time, '[AVIPA and the Food Zone] are absolutely not sustainable. At some point things will have to give…. [AVIPA] is run by a bunch of beltway bandits.'[79] The idea behind these programmes was to create a security impact through cash and seed transfers. Not only was there a cost of overlap between these (and other) programmes, there was a real danger that humanitarian assistance would crowd out local businesses, put Afghan farmers out of business by deflating prices, or generate massive, sudden extension schemes that would not only be unsustainable but could not be followed up since there were no markets big enough for the volume of produce involved.

The need for short-term security almost always trumped common sense. One case in point was a long argument that Greg Mills had with a US Colonel at Bagram in 2006 over investing money into business in an area of Afghanistan where it was clearly not going to work. Greg tried to explain that you would not plant a tree on Mars because it wouldn't grow—instead, you needed to look for areas where there were forests and add to them, i.e. reinforce success, don't reward failure. But the Colonel had a security problem to solve and money to spend, and no amount of advice, good or bad, was going to sway his mind.

Though an outcome, in part, of having more money than sense (and a certain element of desperation), such approaches often seemed to be rooted in a failure on the part of donors to understand how their own countries developed, and to ask local business people (as distinct from local officials or power-brokers) what they needed. Metrics were often unclear, too, since it was extraordinarily difficult to measure the important qualitative aspects of the problem.

In this respect, the modelling approach adopted in Afghanistan—with, at one point, 169 metrics—was little different to former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's computer-driven statistical approach in Vietnam. 'Every quantitative measurement we have, shows we are winning this war,' observed McNamara about that conflict, shortly before he melted down and left office. The problem was that, as he put it (echoing President Johnson's torment quoted earlier), 'If we can only learn to analyse this thing, we'll solve it.' Things happen for a reason. It also turned out that plans on wall charts are largely irrelevant in the field, from Vietnam to Afghanistan. They are only destined for gathering dust and ultimately slipping into File 13.

* * *

This sort of realisation produced the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO) as a unit of the US Department of Defence in 2006. It was to help to stabilise the Iraqi economy, reduce unemployment, and attract foreign investors. In 2009, the TFBSO expanded its operations to help the Afghan government. With spending of $823 million in Afghanistan, what did the task force achieve?

A government audit found that from the outset TFBSO's goals were at odds with its capabilities, and its role within the reconstruction effort was unclear. In 2016 Brian McKeon, principal deputy defence undersecretary for policy, testified before the US Senate that the results of TFBSO's work were 'mixed'.[80] More than half the money earmarked for Afghanistan, for example, was spent on indirect and support costs, not on projects. Only $70 million of the $316.3 million worth of TFBSO contracts (or 22%) fully met their deliverables. This was deemed due to a lack of TFBSO priorities concerning objectives, mission, and strategy, along with lack of time, resident expertise, or outside support. The TFBSO reportedly failed to account for the reality of operating in Afghanistan, including politics, culture, weather, and security. It failed, said the audit, even at big projects where it focused its attention, such as large-scale mining, and was found to be in conflict with other US agencies operating in Afghanistan.[81] Other than that, it was a good idea.

None of this is unique to TFBSO. In many ways it was typical of every organization that operated in Afghanistan (or Iraq for that matter) during the coalition interventions there. TFBSO's supposedly mixed record, one report noted, 'is an adjective that only amateurs from the proverbial nosebleed section would interpret as decisive'. As a RAND assessment found, 'regardless of today's perceived effectiveness of the Task Force in Afghanistan, or Iraq, it is likely that…future economic development efforts will contain private sector-focused elements akin to those employed by TFBSO.'[82] The RAND report went on: 'Rather than shunning the Task Force for perceived ineffectiveness, right or wrong, we believe that the US policy community should plan for future organizational solutions to these same challenges.'[83]

Retired US Army Colonel Jim Bullion was recruited as TFBSO's head in Afghanistan in 2012.[84] The Task Force's origins were in the need 'to

have some basis for creating wealth to free [Afghanistan] from dependency.' TFBSO identified the mineral and oil and gas sectors as being the long-term drivers. At the same time, there was a need to identify short-term sectors 'to keep things going. This brought us back to indigenous industries, such as carpets and agricultural sectors.' TFBSO was 'not well understood in the Pentagon,' says Bullion. Additionally, task force members found themselves constantly 'at loggerheads' with USAID.

'The problem was,' remembers Bullion, 'that [USAID] were financing corruption, with the money not being absorbed or overseen properly.' He also noted that, rather than the Afghans being 'allowed to create their own destiny,' USAID wanted to put their stamp on projects, and were willing to fund things in their entirety. By contrast, TFBSO's criteria were to ask 'how much investment the locals were putting in' and for each project to possess a clear business plan, 'just like any entrepreneur'. 'A lot of people said we should put projects in Helmand and Kandahar, as that's where the Taliban are. I said it was a losing proposition and would be good money after bad. Instead, I argued,' remembers Bullion, 'that we should reinforce success, such as in Herat and Mazar.'

* * *

Between 2001 and 2019, the number of international personnel (military and civilian) who served in Afghanistan exceeded two million people, an annual average of 134,000 personnel. They expended an estimated 628 million working days and five billion working hours over that period, an extraordinary, once in a generation commitment of resources to a poor country.[85] That so little came of it all represents a truly staggering lost opportunity.

Was even this Herculean effort insufficient, given the massive scale of the challenge? Or is nothing ever enough in peacebuilding, given the need for international engagement to enable recovery, which as mentioned earlier can be at least as long as the period of decline?

Some see the task of promoting development in conflict zones as, in a word, hopeless. Whatever challenges you find in countries that need aid to patch up their economies or security situations, you find the same on steroids in those at war. The core problem concerns the alignment of international intentions with local interests. Where there is misalignment—

Western interests in this case were about defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and later, nation-building, while Afghan concerns centred on power and money—increasing funding flows will not only fail to resolve problems, but rather make them much worse.

Rory Stewart gathered considerable experience in Afghanistan before joining the British government, not only having walked across the country in 2002, but also running a charity in Kabul, the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, which rebuilt parts of the historic city. He says that 'Afghanistan explodes the naïve idea that money is the problem, that if the West was more generous, the problem would go away. The funds were limitless. There are very few other contexts where money was no object. There was about nothing that could not be funded.'[86]

Or as Stewart's parliamentary colleague Tom Tugendhat, who served in Afghanistan as military governor of the contested district of Musa Qala, notes, 'very rarely does [external intervention] work. It usually creates a new rentier class, with new allegiances. ISAF,' he says, 'in Afghanistan did not help, was not neutral…was just another warlord. Too often the projects that we support are not strategic, but rather about playing a local power game.' Such interventions only work, he notes, 'when you are able to reinforce legitimate local power structures rather than challenge them'.[87]

These views are borne out by countless others. To cite a US State Department official who spent two years in Afghanistan in 2018–19 after postings in Nigeria and Brazil, 'we never felt like we had the data we needed to make progress, or what a successful state even looked like. The overall problem was not so much that there was corruption in the system, but that corruption is the system. If you took it out, the economy and society would collapse.'

But the objectives and timeframes of those giving aid were different from those of the people receiving it. Indeed, these differences incentivised corruption, undermining the creation of an effective state. But these are predominantly Western, donor metrics and impressions. Is there a different way to view the Afghan peace- and state-building experience?

Among the reasons for failure is that promoting development from outside just runs against the grain of development logic. It is also very difficult to build any enterprise amid the uncertainty of war, especially in immovable business ventures such as mines. Insecurity increases the risk premium and discounts value. 'In the end, insurgency kills just about

everything' admits Stewart. 'The difference between the Balkans and Afghanistan,' he notes, 'was the relative security. Perhaps,' he adds, 'we would have done better with more time and a lighter footprint, with more patient, modest steps.'

* * *

These failures—of development, governance, and diplomacy—have led many to the conclusion, as Ehud Barak, the former Israeli prime minister has reflected, that 'Nation-building cannot be effected from outside. It needs the genuine support of the local population to build a different society. As such,' he says, 'it is the work of generations, not administrations.'[88] State-building is by definition an organic process, led by insiders, not outsiders, from the bottom-up rather than top-down.

And, inevitably, failure has led to the conclusion by some that 'Rumsfeld was right' in the Secretary's advocating of a quick in-and-out strike aimed at 'regime change' over 'nation-building'. Yet the flaws in the military strategy were there, too, from the start, and reflected a consistent failure of leadership which continuously undercut the value of allies and military effort, culminating in a disastrous endgame.

4

ENDGAME

> *'Reasons for [Afghan National Army] collapse range from offering of [Special Immigrant Visas] to top leaders and significant number of officers, zero coordination of withdrawal with us, spreading of the Special Forces and commandos to guard duty, clash of two military cultures on concentration of forces, misuse of the air force, and unwillingness to front load assistance among others.'*
>
> Ashraf Ghani, August 2021

In the end, the collapse of the Afghan military during its final campaign season of 2021 (and, by extension, the defeat of the United States and its allies) principally resulted from lack of will. Neither Afghans nor Americans went down gamely, fighting to the last: rather, the debacle of 2021 sat somewhere between a surrender and a betrayal. President Biden's opponents blamed him for the entirety of the collapse, but it was not so much a partisan problem as a system failure involving both of the major US political parties, many allies including NATO, four American presidents and multiple agencies of government, with roots stretching back over two decades.

To be sure, Biden bears the primary responsibility for the disastrous execution of the withdrawal plan on which he and his political team insisted, over the objections of his military advisers.[1] The President was punished politically as a result, his approval plummeting in the weeks after the fall of Kabul. But, other than this, essentially nobody was held accountable.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin both offered their excuses to an angry Congress, but neither was dismissed or resigned. General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of US Central Command, accepted 'full responsibility' for the disastrous drone strike that killed a US-affiliated Afghan aid worker and nine others—including seven children—in the last chaotic days of the withdrawal, but seems to have suffered no consequences as a result.[2] General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged the Afghan debacle as a 'strategic failure—the enemy is in charge in Kabul; there's no way else to describe that'. But neither General offered to step down and neither, apparently, was asked to do so.[3]

The implication—which did not go unnoticed by internal or external critics of the US—is that nobody in the American Government seems particularly to care about losing the war in Afghanistan. This is a serious mistake since it was one of the most momentous foreign policy disasters since the 1970s. Indeed, in many ways, the Afghan debacle combined the American defeat in Saigon in 1975 with the Iran hostage crisis of 1979–81, but on a far grander scale. The thousands of American citizens, Green Card holders and Afghan allies left behind are effectively hostages whose plight at the hands of the Taliban is forcing Washington to treat the new government with kid gloves.

Geopolitically, US allies (especially NATO members) were angered at the forced humiliation they suffered as a result of a chaotic withdrawal conducted without consultation. This sowed doubt among European leaders about Washington's backbone and commitment, and scepticism that the country can stand up to China. The fiasco in Afghanistan looks likely to weaken NATO, harm transatlantic trust and further divide EU capitals from Washington on key issues including China.[4] China, indeed, is the big geopolitical winner—ironically so, since President Biden claimed he was insisting on withdrawal in order to better focus on competing with China.[5]

Finally in terms of consequences, the Western defeat in Afghanistan was a massive morale boost for every jihadist group on the planet. After two decades, the scrappy little Taliban guerrilla movement had succeeded in defeating the all-powerful United States through persistence, continued belief in the one true God, and maintaining faith in the ultimate victory of their cause. Afghan insurgents have now defeated not one but two

superpowers in a generation: the Soviets in 1989 and the United States in 2021.

Their inspirational example for jihadist groups is likely to encourage a worldwide upsurge in terrorism, similar to the seven-year spike in global terrorist activity that followed Abubakar al-Baghdadi's declaration of the Islamic State's 'Caliphate' in the Grand Mosque of Mosul in July 2014. Thus, even if Taliban leaders keep their promise, given in their February 2020 agreement with the US, not to allow Afghanistan to become a base for terrorist attacks on any other country, the West's defeat in Afghanistan is likely to extend the War on Terrorism for another decade or more.

Slow Disintegration after 2015

The reasons for the collapse of the Afghan military in 2021 are not particularly complex; they have been obvious to most observers, and even casual visitors to Afghanistan, since at least 2015. When the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) withdrew from Afghanistan at the beginning of that year, coalition forces transitioned from counter insurgency (COIN) to security force assistance (SFA). Under the COIN strategy, implemented by the Obama administration in 2010–2014 under the somewhat misleading title of the 'Afghan Surge,' international forces carried the main combat burden. As discussed in Chapter 1, their role was to clear Taliban and other insurgents from key areas, hold those areas to separate the insurgents from the population, build Afghan civil and military capability until the locals were capable of taking over the fight, then transfer control to the Afghan government. The goal, during the surge, was not to completely defeat the Taliban but rather to weaken the insurgents to the point where Afghan forces could take the lead in countering them, with coalition support, for the long haul.

The surge strategy was, however, undermined from the outset, when President Obama—in the very speech in which he announced the campaign in December 2009—also announced that it would end in July 2011.[6] One of us happened to be sitting with two pro-Taliban negotiators from Kandahar when the surge was announced. As the televised speech ended, they shook their heads in amazement. 'Are you deliberately trying to lose?' one asked incredulously. The other pointed out that 'tomorrow, the Taliban will go out and say to the people 'You heard the American President's speech. You

might like the foreigners, but they are leaving in July. What will you do in August, when the foreigners have gone, and we are still here?'[7]

In the event, the departure deadline was extended to December 2014 after a decision at NATO's 2010 Lisbon conference, but the damage was done: by setting a firm timeline for its drawdown and then sticking to it regardless of conditions on the ground, the international community very helpfully told the Taliban exactly how long they had to survive in order to wait it out.

Naturally enough, Taliban commanders did just that. They needed to maintain a certain momentum inside the country in order to stay in the fight, but throughout the surge they carefully calibrated their activity and withheld their main effort. They kept their leadership and many of their best fighters safe in Pakistan and built them up in anticipation of the coalition's scheduled departure.

In effect, some parts of the country were treated as an economy-of-force operation. As the surge drew to a close in 2013–2014, having damaged those parts of the Taliban still in Afghanistan but done next to nothing to disrupt the parts of the network safe in Pakistan, coalition commanders congratulated themselves on their success and justified their pre-planned departure on the basis that Taliban activity had diminished. In truth the Taliban were simply waiting until the West left before escalating the conflict once again.

Under the post-surge SFA posture, as ISAF wrapped up to be replaced with the Resolute Support Mission from early 2015 onward, the Taliban did just that. ISAF combat brigades and regional commands were replaced with Train, Advise and Assist (TAA) commands, and international forces stepped back from direct combat to a supporting role. Under the new approach, the Afghan forces now carried the main combat burden, and a smaller number of international troops were present primarily to train, advise and occasionally accompany Afghan police and soldiers as they sought to suppress the insurgency.

Governance and development efforts tailored off, the PRTs handed over to local actors, and—in what was probably a positive development, given its negative effect on corruption—aid spending dropped significantly. In addition to training and advice, under the SFA posture international forces provided air support as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability to the Afghan forces, and international contractors

delivered maintenance and logistic support, while coalition countries continued funding the effort.

This transition to SFA at the start of 2015 brought the international presence in Afghanistan onto a quite sustainable footing, in military and economic terms, for the US and its allies. Coalition casualty rates fell dramatically from their peak during the surge, when allied fatalities had averaged 34 per month, to just 1.5 per month from 2015 onwards.[8] Washington's spending on the war, likewise, dropped from its high point during the surge years (when the cost averaged $92 billion/year) to an annual cost of approximately $58 billion.

While far from cost-free, continued engagement in Afghanistan would not have been unsustainable in economic or human terms, given sufficient political will. But the fact that the coalition casualty rate dropped by a full 96% after the end of COIN, whereas the financial burn rate fell only 37%, highlights the harsh reality that NATO had transitioned from fighting the war until 2015 to mostly paying for it, with Afghans now doing the lion's share of fighting and dying.

And this was the critical problem: the post-2015 posture might have been sustainable for the coalition, but it was far too costly in human terms to be sustainable for the Afghans. As noted in Chapter One, total coalition deaths (including combat and non-combat fatalities, by all troop-contributing nations) during the entire war numbered 3,590, with the bulk of those occurring during the surge.[9] By contrast, Afghan police and military deaths were estimated at as many as 70,000 over the same period, with most occurring after the surge, when Afghan forces bore the brunt of combat. This loss rate was simply too high to be sustainable for the Afghan forces over time. After 2015, the coalition could, in purely military terms, have kept the war going forever, but the Afghans could not.

An annual cycle emerged in the years after 2015, with a major Taliban offensive launched each spring in which Taliban columns operating in the provinces seized key territory, particularly in areas around the ring-road, the highway network that connects Afghanistan's major cities with each other and Kabul. Each fighting season, the Taliban would push police and military garrisons out of their isolated outposts in rural districts, and a government counter-offensive later in the year would recapture much (but crucially, not all) of that territory while simultaneously losing many troops and police in the process.

Also, from 2015 onward—notably, during the Battle of Kunduz in September–October of that year—Taliban offensives tended to be larger in scale and more sophisticated in their execution, targeting provincial capitals and other major cities. At the same time, asymmetric attacks (bombings, assassinations of government officials, driveby shootings and raids on key urban sites) increased, forcing the Afghan military and police to divert significant resources to urban security.

The appearance of Islamic State's Khorasan branch (ISIS-K)—a spinoff from the Pakistani Taliban that first arose across the south and east in 2015 and soon gained a solid foothold in the eastern province of Nangarhar on the border with Pakistan—brought another, much more radical actor into the conflict. ISIS-K targeted (and was targeted by) the Taliban as well as the government, massively complicating the conflict.

In effect, with each successive year as the Taliban grew stronger, as foreign forces progressively pulled back and new combatants such as ISIS-K emerged, Kabul's control in the countryside was eroding. The government was being forced to spread its troops ever more thinly to defend an increasing number of localities, and with each year's counter-offensive, those troops were failing to recapture all the lost ground, while suffering more casualties than they could afford. As a consequence, the government in Kabul found itself further and further behind the power curve at the start of each year's campaign.

The Selection-Destruction Cycle

One key reason for the unsustainable loss rate was, counterintuitively, the size and professionalism of Afghan Special Operations Forces (SOF). From 2011 onward, as SOF grew, they became too big for the size of the overall Afghan defence establishment from which they were drawn. As the military sociologist Roger Beaumont pointed out in his 1974 classic, *Military Elites*, when an elite element such as a SOF component becomes too big in proportion to its parent organization, it can exert a net-negative effect on overall performance, through a phenomenon Beaumont called the 'selection-destruction cycle'.[10]

Capable troops, particularly non-commissioned officers, who would otherwise have been junior leaders forming the backbone of conventional combat units, are instead selected for service as individual fighters in elite

units. Their skills, talent and motivation are thus lost to the larger force, which suffers a steady brain-drain from its conventional component to its elite component.

Once in elite units, the force's best troops are thrown into high-intensity battles. They are used to rescue desperate situations or committed to dangerous and difficult tasks beyond the capabilities of ordinary troops, so that they typically suffer much higher losses than their conventional counterparts. Over time, this selectiondestruction cycle progressively selects the most talented members of the larger force and kills them off, lowering the combat-effectiveness of the organisation as a whole.

From 2015, the selection-destruction cycle was running in overdrive in both the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). ANA SOF, and special ANP units such as the brigade commanded by Kandahar's Provincial Chief of Police, Abdul Raziq (discussed in Chapter 2) were used as fire brigades. They rushed around the country as emergency quickreaction forces to reinforce threatened areas, respond to Taliban or ISIS attacks, and spearhead the retaking of territory during each year's counter-offensive.

The average ordinary *kandak* (battalion) of the ANA, like the average ANP garrison, lost its most talented and motivated members to these high-priority forces, so that ordinary units became less capable and less keen to fight. This, in turn, meant they required ever more frequent rescuing by SOF and other elite forces, further increasing those forces' loss rates and accelerating the selection-destruction cycle. This dynamic was at its most intense during the final campaign of summer 2021, discussed below.

A related issue was abusive behaviour toward the population by police and military units—behaviour that was in large part driven by lack of resources at unit level, combined with higher-level corruption within the ministries—and which destroyed public support for the government. Local Afghan National Police posts, for example, consisted in many areas of little more than one or two green-painted shipping containers tucked into the inside wall of a bulldozed earthen rampart surmounted by reinforced HESCO steel-sand barriers, topped with razor wire, with a prefabricated cylindrical concrete guard-post on each corner.

Seen from the outside, or from a passing helicopter, these lonely dust-coloured outposts blended into the background. Inside the wire, looking out through the weapon slits in their guard-posts, the troops of a beleaguered

garrison might receive an occasional resupply of ammunition, fuel or radio batteries, but food (or even water in some parts of the country) was hard to come by, with resupply occurring intermittently at best. Pay was often late or diverted to corrupt officials, so that garrisons lacked even the money to purchase supplies they needed, and frequently resorted to extortion from the community and robbing travellers passing through their checkpoints.

This abuse (and the contempt and disdain it generated from local people) undermined support for the army and police, made locals more willing to provide intelligence and support to the Taliban, and meant that government forces in the districts were continually fighting to defend their positions, rather than relying on public support in pro-government areas (of which there were few left outside the cities) to focus on rolling the Taliban back.

Kabul's policy of not posting individuals to serve in their home regions —driven by fears of regional warlordism dating back to the 1990s—further estranged the army and police from the people. And as SOF were increasingly rushing from crisis to crisis after 2015, these quick-reaction forces had even less connection with the population and became even more prone to alienating local communities, or they engaged in abuses themselves.[11]

The Afghan military and police had inherited from ISAF a much more extensive footprint than they could sustain. They had too many small outposts in too many places, too few ready reserves, and were increasingly stretched to defend everywhere since the enemy could attack anywhere. But once an area had been occupied with a semi-permanent government presence, Kabul's prestige was at stake. It was extraordinarily difficult for the government to consolidate and redeploy forces lest these actions give the appearance of abandonment and retreat, with the attendant risk of a loss of government credibility and public legitimacy.

This, indeed, was one reason why the government, encouraged by Resolute Support advisers, insisted on recapturing as much of the lost terrain as possible at the end of each year's campaign season. But periodic abandonment and recapture of these contested areas—a pattern sometimes called 'mowing the grass'—had a devastating effect on local populations. Those willing to work with the military and police when they were present ended up being abandoned when they left. As the Taliban returned these people either had to flee or be killed, often publicly and brutally, to send a

message to the rest of the local community. When the police and soldiers eventually returned, their previous allies would be dead, they would have fled or have been intimidated, and the community would be even less willing than before to work with them.

In the last two years of the Obama administration, despite the steady erosion of government control in rural districts (and alongside increasing violence and ongoing political instability in the cities), the US-led coalition steadily drew down the numbers of advisers, contractors and aid personnel operating under the 'train, advise and equip' SFA mission. This reduction—which ran counter to best-practice COIN, in which withdrawal of combat troops and transition to SFA should be accompanied by an increase, not a reduction, in advisory support—was driven by American domestic politics. It was well under way by the end of the administration in January 2017.

The incoming Trump team initially appeared to be open to supporting the Afghan government with a strategy of long-term commitment, a modest troop increase (to a total of about 15,000 troops in country) and an increase in air and drone strikes designed to intensify pressure on the Taliban to force them to negotiate.[12]

But by mid-2018 President Trump—never famous for his patience, and having campaigned on ending 'ridiculous, endless wars'—was frustrated by the lack of military progress on the ground, and reversed his policy. He began direct talks with the Taliban over the head of the Afghan government, thereby conceding to a key, long-standing Taliban demand.[13]

By August 2019 he was calling for a drawdown as quickly as possible; by October that year the drawdown was under way. By February 2020 negotiators in Doha, led by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, had reached an agreement with the Taliban for a full (albeit conditional) withdrawal. By the end of 2020 there were only about 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan, down from 15,000 in June 2018, the month when Trump appears to have given up on trying to win the war and decided instead to withdraw.[14]

In this, despite appearing initially (perhaps influenced by National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and his deputy, Nadia Schadlow) to be serious about actually winning in Afghanistan, Trump showed himself to be consistent with previous US presidents in that he persisted in conflating the strategy in Afghanistan with the authorised 'troop ceiling' in theatre. Indeed, at times under every president since George W. Bush, it appeared as if the entire goal of American strategy in Afghanistan—and hence the

parameters within which American allies were forced to operate—was merely to reduce troop numbers on a domestic political timeline, ideally without an embarrassing defeat for the Kabul government or (far worse from Washington's standpoint) the need to put troops back into Afghanistan after pulling them out.

It was this thinking that lay behind the Trump administration's desperate desire for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, with or without the Afghan government on board. It led ultimately to the February 2020 Doha Agreement, a separate deal done directly between Washington and the Taliban, which sidelined the Afghan government and destroyed any negotiating leverage Ashraf Ghani might have had, rendering him impotent.

As all this was happening, the Taliban's strategy of steadily choking the ring-road, driving local police and military garrisons out and gaining control of rural districts through a combination of co-option, intimidation and delivery of local services (particularly mediation and dispute resolution services, and basic civil law and governance functions) was paying off. By early 2021, the approach of patiently surrounding district centres through successive spring offensives had put the insurgents into pole position for that year's campaign. When, in mid-April, President Biden said it was 'time to end America's longest war' and announced that all US troops would be out of Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of September 11, Taliban leaders realised that the spring offensive they had already quietly launched might make this the final fighting season of the war.[15]

The Collapse of 2021

The campaign of 2021 began in early March with a spate of small- and medium-sized attacks at the district level. Taliban local commanders focused initially on picking off the multiple garrisons and district centres that were already isolated and under pressure. Local guerrilla groups, supported by 'main force' Taliban columns trained in Pakistan which were organised and equipped for a war of manoeuvre, partially encircled police and military posts, carefully leaving open an escape route for the garrisons. They then sent in a local elder, often a respected community member known to the garrison, to negotiate a surrender.

Garrisons that agreed to hand over their posts along with their military hardware and combat supplies were given safe passage and allowed to

leave. The few that chose to fight were crushed and their garrisons massacred to teach others a lesson. Combined with brutal torture and execution of any SOF or members of NDS (the Afghan intelligence service) unfortunate enough to fall into their hands, this meant that garrisons increasingly chose to flee rather than fight.[16]

Even for otherwise motivated commanders, Washington's decision to dramatically cut back air support, ISR and logistics and maintenance assistance for the Afghan military after May 2021 meant that local garrisons rapidly began to run out of ammunition, medical supplies, fuel, food and water. Helicopter resupply became increasingly impractical, while road convoys became fewer and smaller. Garrison commanders now realised they were on their own, while individual soldiers and police officers knew that if they were wounded, there was no way they could be evacuated. The blow to morale was massively deepened when US forces abandoned their major airbase at Bagram in early July, without coordinating with Afghan counterparts. This left outlying garrisons even more obviously out in the cold.

As increasing numbers of district centres fell during May, June and July, the Taliban began to encroach on provincial capitals and other urban centres, applying the same technique—partial encirclement, intimidation and negotiation to force a surrender. In this, they succeeded in capturing terrain and military equipment with little fighting and at the cost of few casualties, and a narrative of unstoppable Taliban momentum began to take hold. There was also a network effect: for the few garrison commanders who still wanted to fight, it soon became obvious that with so many others surrendering, insisting on defending their bases would have made no difference to the outcome and simply resulted in their own people being brutally killed for nothing.

By mid-July, Afghan Commandos and other SOF units were fighting frantically to hold the key cities of Kandahar, capital of Kandahar province in the Taliban's traditional heartland, and Lashkar Gah, capital of Helmand. Here the selection-destruction cycle of the past few years finally played out as Afghanistan's best troops—who could otherwise have stiffened every other unit in the ANA, formed a mobile reserve to enable others to hold the line or consolidated to cover key cities including Kabul—were bled white and all but destroyed in the desperate defence of the two southern centres. Simultaneously, with the ANA's most capable units concentrated in

Helmand and Kandahar, Taliban columns began pushing into provincial capitals across the rest of Afghanistan. They attacked across the north, aiming to prevent the government from consolidating a stronghold in the northern third of the country, heartland of the ethnic and religious minorities (Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras) who held off the Taliban through the Northern Alliance in the 1990s.

In the north, the 'red first' aid strategy adopted by the international community—the policy, discussed in the previous chapter, of pushing assistance to the most dangerous and conflict-affected parts of Afghanistan, principally in the south and east of the country—had long infuriated local leaders and their communities. Pashtuns and others fighting the government received billions in assistance over the years, whereas communities in the north—which had supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in the 1990s, fought alongside US forces in 2001 and continued to oppose the insurgents through the first decade of the war—felt taken for granted.

By 2015 much of the international assistance had dried up, leaving loyal populations in the north bypassed and embittered. This created opportunities for a 'Northern Taliban' that could draw support from detribalised Pashtuns and non-Pashtun ethnic groups. By 2021, there was a substantial local Taliban presence in the region, with a high degree of popular support and strong local networks. Unsurprisingly, when the Taliban moved against government-controlled cities in the north in the summer campaign of 2021, locals felt little loyalty or commitment to the regime in Kabul or its northern outposts. All this set the scene for the final meltdown, the cascading collapse of one provincial capital after another, in August 2021.

After two decades, the final endgame took just nine days as the war appeared suddenly to speed up. First to fall was Zaranj, capital of Nimroz province in the remote southwest, which the Taliban captured without much of a fight on 6 August; the next day Sheberghan in the north was captured after heavy fighting. Commandos, police and ANA SOF in Kandahar and Lashkar Gah were now surrounded, under severe pressure, and US drones and carrier-based aircraft flew a few airstrikes to support them. These strikes were largely ineffective and were some of the last coalition airstrikes of the war.

Having lost its logistics and maintenance support, the Afghan Air Force at this point was almost out of air-deliverable weapons (rockets and bombs),

less than two-thirds of its aircraft were airworthy and many pilots—intimidated by a carefully targeted Taliban assassination campaign against them and their families—were absent.[17]

Here the Western tendency to conflate strategy with troop numbers came home to roost. Even accepting the impossibility (for both military and domestic US political reasons) of putting additional western troops back into Afghanistan to stabilise the situation, it would have been perfectly possible to surge air support as a way of bolstering the ANA. However, the abandonment of Bagram made this dramatically more difficult, since aircraft had to fly enormous distances—from al-Udeid airbase in Qatar or from the decks of carriers in the Arabian Sea—in order to reach the battle area in Afghanistan, giving them very little time over their targets. It might also not have worked, of course.

But in both material and morale terms, a surge in air support for the Afghan forces might have made a massive difference. Materially, coalition airstrikes would have allowed Afghan air forces to catch their breath, while letting ANA ground forces take advantage of some of the juiciest Taliban targets to appear on the battlefield at any time since 2001, as the Taliban main force massed in the open, in daylight, to attack the cities. In terms of morale, the voices of American pilots over the radio, speaking with ANA air controllers as they guided them to those targets, would have sent an important message of sustained support. Even a modest number of US advisers, including Special Forces Joint Terminal Air Controllers to control and direct air support, could have had an enormous effect on the outcome.

None of that happened. The final US SOF teams to rotate into Afghanistan, drawn from 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) based at Fort Carson, Colorado, left the country in late July. Despite public protestations of unwavering support from President Biden, Secretary Blinken and other officials—given until just two days before the fall of Kabul—from early August onward the coalition barely lifted a finger to help the Afghans stem the tide of Taliban victories.

Those victories now began to come thick and fast. Kunduz and Sar-e Pol, two northern provincial capitals, fell during the day on 8 August, followed late that evening by Taloqan, capital of the northern province of Takhar. The collapse of so many northern cities so quickly underscored the fact that any attempt to rally in a northern bastion—as had happened the 1990s—was certain to fail, even as Afghanistan's most capable forces, the

SOF and Commandos, remained pinned down in the south. The next day, 9 August, the Taliban captured Aybak, capital of Samangan province, and the first major defection to the Taliban of a regional commander (Asif Azimi, a former Afghan senator) took place.

On 10 August two more provincial capitals—Farah in the west and Pol-e Khumri in the north—fell to the Taliban, and the next day Feyzabad, capital of the crucial northern province of Badakhshan, was captured. On 12 August, the city of Ghazni fell, cutting Kandahar off from Kabul by road, and the same day the major western city of Herat fell without a fight and Ismail Khan, one of the great anti-Taliban warlords of the 1990s, a former minister in the Kabul government and governor of Herat province, was filmed surrendering to the Taliban, in another stunning blow to morale. The same day Qala-e Naw, capital of the north-western province of Badghis, was captured.

Overnight, at about midnight of 12/13 August, Kandahar and Lashkar Gah both finally fell to the Taliban, with defeated Afghan commando units fleeing by air to Kabul from Kandahar.[18] At this point the Taliban had captured so much military equipment, released so many prisoners and accepted the surrender of so many thousands of government troops that the government's ability to hold out was rapidly evaporating. US air support had dropped off to nothing and having lost many of their best remaining troops in the defence of Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, the Ghani government was desperately short of forces to defend Kabul.

From Friday 13 August, the collapse accelerated. The fall of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah overnight was followed later that day with the loss of Chagcharan, capital of Ghor province, then Pol-e Alam, arin Kot and Qalat, capitals of the key provinces of Logar, Uruzgan and Zabul. After losing five provincial capitals on Friday, the government lost eight on Saturday: Asadabad, Gardez, Maimana, Mehtar Lam, Nili, Sharana, the critical northern city of Mazar-e Sharif and, late that evening, Maidan Shahr.

The only functioning forces on the government side at this point were a few isolated units outside Kabul, along with remnants of Afghan SOF and two understrength army divisions in the Kabul area. The final day of the campaign, Sunday 15 August, saw Jalalabad, capital of the eastern province of Nangarhar, fall early in the day, followed by Khost, Bamiyan, Mahmud-i Raqi, Charikar and Parun.

Taliban troops took control of the airfields at Bagram and Kandahar the same day, and that afternoon they entered Kabul. In the end, the capital collapsed without a fight as Ashraf Ghani fled in disgrace, his government fell and the Afghan police and military melted away.

Why the Afghan Military Collapsed

As this account makes clear, the collapse of the Afghan government proceeded slowly and barely noticeably at first, beginning in 2015, but reached a tipping point somewhere in the spring of 2021. After that point, the war appeared to rapidly accelerate, leading to the catastrophic disintegration of the Afghan military over the summer, then the astonishingly rapid implosion of the Afghan Republic over a period of only nine days between 6 and 15 August. This, in fact, should not surprise anyone: it is entirely consistent with what we know of the endgame dynamics of internal conflicts.

As a team led by Gordon McCormick at the Naval Postgraduate School demonstrated more than fifteen years ago, resistance movements degrade slowly but states—which embody many moving parts that all have to work together for government to function—collapse at an accelerating rate. McCormick's team observed that 'states generally pass a tipping point and enter their endgames and begin to decay at an *accelerating* rate. This is often an indicator that the final period of the struggle has begun. Between the time the conflict enters this phase and the time the state disintegrates, the conflict speeds up… Insurgencies, by contrast, tend to decline historically at a *decelerating* rate.'[19]

Arguably, in a material sense, the withdrawal of US assistance in early May 2021 represented the tipping point of the campaign. The removal of air support, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance), maintenance, advisers and contractors massively undercut the ability of the Afghans to resupply, maintain their vehicles and aircraft, evacuate their wounded or determine the enemy's next move. Coming on top of years of unsustainable losses, the sudden cut in capability rendered the Afghan military effort unsustainable. It is worth noting in this context that, by pulling out these critical capabilities, the US government did exactly what it had spent more than a decade assuring the Afghans they would absolutely never do.

The ANA, ANP and Afghan SOF were built like a tower of Jenga blocks: moderately stable while all the pieces remained in place, but completely unable to stand once certain critical capabilities were removed. Those critical capabilities—deliberately and by design—were provided by the coalition.

Just to pick one example, in 2017–18 when the ageing Afghan helicopter fleet needed replacing, the coalition, led by the US, insisted that rather than replacing existing Mi-17 helicopters with newer models of the same aircraft (which Afghan pilots already knew how to fly, and Afghan maintainers could service), the Afghans must instead adopt the much more complicated and sophisticated UH-60 Blackhawk. The new aircraft were far more complex to fly and maintain, and many of them turned up fitted for, but not with, the critical componentry needed to operate effectively in Afghanistan.

But this was not the point: the goal was not to give the Afghans an aircraft they could independently fly and maintain, but rather to lock them into a US-centric, coalition-dependent platform that would prevent them from acting independently.[20] A similar dynamic operated across other capabilities: ongoing dependence on the international community (specifically, the Western coalition) for everything from vehicles and radios to weapons and ammunition was a feature, not a bug. Of course, the only reason Afghans were willing to agree to such an arrangement was that the coalition, led by the US, promised repeatedly to never, under any circumstances, take these capabilities away. And of course, once they were whisked away following President Biden's withdrawal announcement, the collapse was inevitable.

The collapse of the critically important Afghan air capability is worth recounting in detail here. US withdrawal of military personnel and contractors affected the ability of the Afghan Air Force to maintain its capabilities, but Kabul—being locked, by design, into dependency on US platforms and personnel—moved too slowly to replace US capabilities with other suppliers and contractors.

For the 186 airframes, rotary and fixed wing, in the Air Force at the start of July 2021, maintenance had become the critical issue. There were just 200 trained Afghan technicians, about 30% of the requirement, attempting to perform the same tasks that thousands of (mostly US) contractors had been managing before the pullout forced their evacuation

two months earlier. Insurance considerations made it impossible to retain the US technical specialists in country, so they were forced to relocate to Qatar and the UAE, and then try to assist their Afghan counterparts via long-distance Zoom calls.

Unsurprisingly under the circumstances, only eighty-eight aircraft were flying by early July 2021, and these at 'over maximum capacity' according to the Deputy National Security Adviser.[21] Maintenance requirements were complicated by the mixed nature of the fleet. Russian platforms included more than 60 Mi-8/Mi-17 helicopters, seventeen of which were under repair by July, with ten more due for repair; and eight Mi-35s, all of which required refurbishment. American aircraft included 74 MD530F Cayuse Scout helicopters, all of which required upgrading, eleven UH-60 Blackhawks, twenty-three A-29 Super Tucano COIN aircraft, three C-130 transports (of which two were operational), and thirty-four AC-208s and C-28s. Other platforms included a Pilatus PC-12 and three Czech Aero L39 jet-trainers.

By mid July, non-US international suppliers and maintenance specialists had agreed on terms for continued support to the Afghan Air Force, and the necessary equipment was lined up to be delivered, including an additional ten Mi-8/17 helicopters. While Ghani's government said it would pay for these services 'from its own resources',[22] it was unclear whether the government actually had these resources at hand. Whatever the case, the critical air support was never delivered and Kabul collapsed at about the same pace that morale plummeted.

Even more importantly that its material, the sudden removal of critical capabilities such as the air assets had a ruinous moral effect on an ANA, which already felt itself being betrayed by corrupt leaders in Kabul. Its soldiers could see politicians talking peace with the Taliban and organising their own escape from Afghanistan, while simultaneously pushing the troops into combat.

When the coalition capabilities that underpinned the Afghan military's ability to actually fight were pulled out in May, the impact on morale was devastating. This cemented the collapse of the air support capability on which the ANA depended, and massively reinforced the blow to morale.

Once several district garrisons had surrendered, the network effect took hold and more districts fell. Once enough districts had fallen, the Taliban moved on to target the provincial capitals. This reinforced the narrative of

inevitability that had begun to sweep across the country, and predictions of doom became a self-fulfilling prophecy. American promises of air support —given by Biden and Secretary Blinken as late as two days before the fall of Kabul—never materialised, while the pathetic call from American negotiators in Doha for the Taliban to spare the US embassy in Kabul (which became public on 12 August) emphasised the reality that the US had no plans to fight for its partner, but was now solely looking out for itself.[23]

Indeed, the very fact that these US negotiators, led by Zalmay Khalilzad, were engaged in talks with the Taliban on putting together a transitional government in Doha even as Ashraf Ghani's government was fighting for its life in Kabul showed that Afghanistan's so-called allies were more than willing to allow a Taliban takeover. The message to the fighting men on the front lines around Kabul could not have been clearer.

In the final hours, however, it was the collapse of the civil government —and specifically the flight of Ashraf Ghani and his inner circle from the Arg in central Kabul—that convinced those combat units still operating in and around Kabul that all was lost. It's therefore worth asking why the civil government crumbled so abruptly.

Why the Civil Government Collapsed

The reasons for the government's fall have been discussed in some detail in other chapters, but in essence—and in addition to the other factors mentioned so far—the isolation of President Ghani himself is worth mentioning. The president, who had failed to garner more than a small percentage of the vote in either of his previous elections, achieved an even smaller percentage in one of the lowest-turnout elections in Afghan history, in 2019. Ghani had minimal backing from the population, his support base lying largely in the urban elite and the international community. Yet he was also strangely disconnected from the rest of his government, his irascibility and pedantic nature leading to high turnover at senior levels of the Afghan civil administration and military structure, as officials quit or were fired at astonishing rates.

Likewise, provincial and local officials in many cases had minimal ties to their regions; drawn from a rentier elite that relied on international support for access to the resources that protected their power, they had nothing to offer their communities when that support was withdrawn.

Almost to the end, Ghani saw regional commanders—Ismail Khan, Rashid Dostum, Noor Mohammed Atta—and their local militias as a threat to the central government's monopoly of force, and so sidelined them and starved them of support. He realised only in the final weeks of the war that his government could not both defend its territory and generate a mobile reserve with sufficient strength to confront the Taliban.

Two weeks before the fall of Kabul, the warlords finally achieved a measure of official status, their militia were re-designated as 'Public Forces', and a joint command centre was created to integrate their efforts with those of the ANA and ANP. It was much too late: ill-equipped and untrained, the militias were thrown into battle during the final days of the war, unprepared and unsupported. Most melted away within hours, and commanders like Dostum and Atta were quickly forced to flee across the border into Uzbekistan.

Crisis reveals character. Ghani's was focused on the administrative trappings of government and the intellectual, not to say bookish, pursuits of the international class from which he came, rather than on the substance of government presence, personal contact with the Afghan people and the delivery of a social contract with the population.

Once districts and provinces began to fall, Ghani's aloofness left him in an isolated bubble. To those who met with him in the last weeks of the war he appeared frozen, in shock or in denial, interacting only with a tiny circle of close advisers. But there was an undertow of panic, just below the surface, which broke out when it was believed that the Taliban had entered the palace. On that last, chaotic afternoon, Ghani fled with some—though not all—of his advisers, his government collapsed immediately, and the military (the hard-core remnant of which had been preparing to defend Kabul until that moment) found itself with nothing left to defend and slipped away.

The Taliban's forward troops had paused on the edge of the city, hoping for an orderly transition of power in which they would not need to occupy Kabul until the Western evacuation was complete, but the rapid collapse of Ghani's government prompted US leaders to ask them to come into the city and occupy it. The deadly chaos around Hamid Karzai International Airport —soon, one assumes, to be renamed—was the result.

What Could Have Been Done Differently?

There are literally a million things the international community, and the US-led coalition forces, could have done differently had they cared enough to avoid the catastrophic endgame of 2021. We will confine ourselves to eleven key points, however, in rough chronological order.

The first, discussed in detail above, centres on the missed opportunities of the 2001 peace negotiation. Failure to find and talk to the Taliban leadership, acting as if they had simply ceased to exist once defeated on the battlefield, excluded them from the peace-making process at the only time in the past two decades when the international community could potentially have negotiated for an inclusive government from the proverbial position of strength. This, in our view, was the mother of all errors—or as Lakhdar Brahimi put it, the original sin.

Absence of the Taliban meant that a couple of dozen Afghan leaders (including the corrupt warlords and power brokers described earlier) had the opportunity to put in place a political economy that suited them rather than being forced to actually negotiate peace. A related lost opportunity of the 2001–2002 period was the adoption, through European and UN pressure and US inattention, of a Eurocentric, centralised notion of how a future Afghan state should be structured and how it should interact with its population.

Ironically, the 1964 constitution given to his people by King Zahir Shah—one of the few absolute monarchs ever to voluntarily relinquish his power and limit himself as a constitutional sovereign—was at hand, and could have been used. Zahir Shah himself was still alive in 2001, but the notion of a constitutional monarch as either a permanent solution or a transitional waypoint to a new constitution was never seriously considered. As one indication of its broad-based appeal, the Taliban government in October 2021 announced that they planned to use the 1964 constitution, stripped of some elements they consider un-Islamic as an interim constitution.

The second, hugely consequential thing that could have been done differently was of course not invading Iraq, or at least not doing so while Afghanistan remained unstable, and Osama bin Laden still unaccounted for. The drain on resources, focus and attention—not to mention the massive blow to US credibility worldwide—triggered by the Iraq War was a constant distraction, a self-inflicted two-front war that made rebuilding and stabilising Afghanistan infinitely more difficult.

Iraq was bad for Afghanistan in another way too: although many of the most innovative counter-insurgency ideas came from commanders in Afghanistan (outstanding fighting leaders like Mick Nicholson, Chris Cavoli and Chris Haas, among many others), the temporary success achieved during the 2007 Surge in Iraq made some political and military leaders think they had cracked the code and stumbled onto the perfect template for tamping down an insurgency, and thus all that had to be done in Afghanistan was to copy the lessons of Iraq and a similar success would follow.

One of us, freshly back from Baghdad, was told to get on a plane the following week, fly out to Kabul and 'figure out how to do in Afghanistan what you guys just did in Iraq'. Vainly we explained that Afghanistan and Iraq were almost as different as any two places could possibly be, that Afghan and Iraqi society were different, and that success in Iraq had been both idiosyncratic and temporary, more a matter of the unique circumstances around the tribal awakening against Al-Qaeda than some repeatable counter-insurgency model.

The West forgot that while principles can be translated from one COIN campaign to another, techniques almost never can. By copying the methods of Iraq in a radically different environment during the Afghan surge of 2010–2014, many opportunities were missed—not least by disregarding the expertise of Afghan leaders who had been fighting the Taliban for eight years at that point and had many lessons to offer.

The third thing that could have been done differently was the surge itself. As discussed earlier, the so-called surge was too small (with fewer than half the troops commanders in the field had asked for), too brief (less than a year with the full force deployed before the timetable-driven drawdown began) and too compromised.

The fourth and perhaps most critical thing that could have been done differently was to build an Afghan military that mirrored its parent society and reflected how Afghans (some of the world's most accomplished fighters) prefer to fight, rather than mimicking western organisation and methods. Early in the war, the coalition began building an ANA that could defend Afghanistan against external threats and allowed coalition Special Forces and other agencies to build irregular forces for internal security and counterterrorism. These were drawn from the same recruiting base as the Taliban, they organised themselves similarly, moved in a similar fashion

among the people and were set up to travel light, move fast and keep up with the enemy.

By 2006, a process of regularising and conventionalising the ANA had kicked in, the early (and locally appropriate) irregular units had mostly been forced under conventional military control, and a series of experiments with paramilitary policing—Afghan National Civil Order Police, Afghan Border Police, Afghan Local Police, and so on—had begun.

By 2009, belatedly realising that it had built not an Afghan military institution but merely a series of combat units structured to fight as Western forces did and who were wholly reliant on external support, the coalition began to construct capabilities such as logistics, maintenance, administration, an Army staff, and training institutions.

By 2011, again somewhat belatedly, the coalition had finally begun to focus on air power, building first a set of capabilities for battlefield air mobility, casualty evacuation and command-and-control and then developing air-to-ground close air support units. By 2021, the military we had helped the Afghans to build was perfectly suited for operating alongside a coalition force that was no longer there, drawing on coalition capabilities the coalition had designed it to depend on, but which NATO had withdrawn. The result was a foregone conclusion.

Fifth, instead of adopting the ‘red first’ aid strategy discussed above and in the previous chapter—where asssitance was poured into the most violent and unstable places in Afghanistan in hopes of stabilising the environment—a ‘green first’ strategy of building on and reinforcing success could have been adopted. In practice, this would have meant focusing development efforts in places where the population supported the government and conditions were stable enough for infrastructure and economic development to take hold.

In parallel, the coalition could have conducted community engagement in unstable areas, pointing out the clear benefits of peace in order to persuade communities to reject the insurgency. In this way, the people of northern Afghanistan—who spent years complaining about lack of development despite their loyalty to Kabul, then became disillusioned as the aid dried up and, finally, felt no obligation to the government when it turned up, too late, asking for help—would have seen immediate benefit.

A focus on local government, applying resources to the district level in support of provincial and rural development, would have been another thing

that could have been done differently. To be fair, coalition commanders on the ground understood this from the outset and there were multiple efforts—the District Support Teams, Village Stability Operations, District Stabilisation Framework, Agribusiness Development Teams, the Ministry for Reconstruction and Rural Development, and so on—to implement bottom-up governance and development structures responsive to local communities rather than distant elites. In practice, with a few honourable exceptions, it proved impossible to make such efforts stick: sooner rather than later they were captured, corrupted and directed to benefit the same stakeholders who were already feeding from the coalition trough.

In this respect, a seventh thing that could have done differently would have been to put the rule of law at the centre of coalition efforts, rather than treating it as an afterthought or supporting effort that was secondary to the big three COIN activities of security, governance and economic development. The Taliban were, fundamentally, a vigilante law-and-order organisation that gained support by delivering something people needed: speedy, predictable, non-corrupt justice.

The infamous Taliban sharia courts in fact spent most of their time doing civil rather than criminal law—births, deaths, divorces, inheritances, land disputes, water and grazing rights. They provided a low-cost dispute resolution service in rural areas, and those who benefited from their judgments held valuable assets on the Taliban's authority so that, irrespective of ideology, they had an incentive to support that authority. Even those who did not benefit from particular Taliban actions (or who felt targeted by them) often preferred the predictability and relative incorruptibility of Taliban cadres to the absentee officials and abusive power brokers they otherwise encountered.

In contrast, for the coalition, rule of law at the village and district level was something of an afterthought: there was a focus on national and provincial courts, training of judges and lawyers, rewriting the Afghan legal code and filtering down the new system to the local level. By the time the international community got there, the Taliban had been delivering practical rule-of-law services for nearly a decade, cementing their legitimacy and building credibility with local communities whose only interaction with the government was being shaken down for money every time they passed a police post.

Eighth, and utterly obviously, the coalition could have kept its promises to the Afghans that it would maintain external support for them after the end of the COIN period and the transition after 2015 to SFA. Having designed specific dependencies into the Afghan system, somehow senior leaders and politicians seem to have forgotten their own earlier decisions and expected a system to stand on its own two feet that had been specifically designed not to be able to do so.

Reducing troop numbers could have worked, had this had been accompanied by a surge of materiel, logistics, air strikes, intelligence support and (perhaps) a regional reserve poised to deploy in extremis as required. None of that happened: instead, the coalition drew down every aspect of support simultaneously and then were shocked to discover that the Afghan military they had designed not to be able to fight without external help could indeed not do so.

Ninth, at the political level (and relevant here because it was the collapse of Ghani's government that ultimately triggered the disintegration of the Af-ghan military), the international coalition could have insisted on fair elections and not interfered to pick the winners it wanted to see rather than those that Afghan voters preferred. This would have avoided the manipulated stalemates, broken only by international pressure, that occurred in 2009 and 2014, or the chaotic mess of 2019 in which two rival candidates claimed victory and held competing inauguration ceremonies. The legitimacy and credibility of the Kabul government—in the eyes of its own people, not its international donors—was the critical missing piece for much of the war. The Taliban were nothing if not authentic.

Tenth, and conditional on the previous point, if the coalition had a legitimate partner with popular support in the Afghan government, it could have negotiated differently. Rather than doing so in such a way as to sideline and render impotent the Afghan government, negotiating over their heads for a separate peace that left them hanging, it could have structured the negotiating approach to force the Taliban to deal with Kabul on the Afghan government's terms.

The critical corollary here would have been a focus on maintaining leverage—combat leverage, political leverage, negotiating leverage, economic leverage—rather than showing a willingness to surrender that leverage first and then demand that the Taliban honour commitments they had already repeatedly broken. By making the Kabul government so

dependent on the coalition, and with the intervenors then wanting to leave more than wanting to win, Kabul was doomed to destruction and the coalition to defeat.

Finally, and by far the most important point, NATO could have stopped persistently underestimating the Taliban. Perhaps it was the swiftness of the West's victory in 2001, or the low level of material capability they possessed for most of the war, or their traditional garb and rustic language, but whatever the reason—across two decades, and every aspect of the effort in Afghanistan, the West consistently underestimated the Taliban.

As a fighting force, a political organisation, as the embodiment of a nationalist propaganda critique of the government, as a parallel governance structure or a social movement, the coalition never took the Taliban seriously at any time during the war—not, at least, until they took the government down and captured Kabul.

As late as 8 July 2021, five weeks before the fall of Kabul, President Biden was scoffing at the notion that the Taliban could defeat the government. Ashraf Ghani, for his part, spent his last weeks in office focused on e-governance and public service reform—this while the Taliban were killing hundreds of his troops, overrunning garrisons and capturing multiple districts per week. A series of military commanders and civilian officials were still obsessed with secondary, nice-to-have issues when the enemy was already at the gates.

Taking the Taliban seriously, and seeing them as the existential threat they became, would have made the most important difference of all. Unfortunately, this did not occur, and the endgame of 2021 was the result.

* * *

5

THE BALL KEEPS BOUNCING

> '*No, it is not [inevitable]. Because the Afghan troops have 300,000 well-equipped soldiers—as well equipped as any army in the world —and an air force against something like 75,000 Taliban. It is not inevitable.'*
>
> President Joe Biden on the likelihood of a Taliban takeover, 8 July 2021

> *'We always go in with our ideals and we change the world. Then we leave. We always leave. That ball, though, keeps on bouncing.'*
>
> Tom Hanks as Charlie Wilson, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 1980

From the start, the Afghan mission was confounded by two fundamental inconsistencies: on the one hand, the need for a quick strike to topple the Taliban as the hosts of Al-Qaeda, and on the other, the need for a longer-term attempt at nation building while spreading democracy through parliaments and constitutions. The contradiction was evident in the failure at the outset to think things through to the finish, the continuous paring back of resources from the stated military requirement, the weakness of relationships with Afghanistan's neighbours and the reliance on military over diplomatic tools.

The Afghan mission was a case study in improvisation, even though the basic requirements for successful peacebuilding or counter-insurgency missions were well established through bitter, prior experience. The absence

of a plan, with clear objectives and sufficient resources, was clear from the outset.

* * *

A great deal of the responsibility for the collapse of the Afghan army must reside with the government of the United States. As the last chapter showed, the Afghan government and military were visibly, albeit gradually, failing for years before the final collapse in August 2021. At its core, the international community miscomprehended, until much too late in the day, the political character of Afghanistan's conflict. The mood of vengeance in the United States after 9/11 meant that leaders in Washington were in no mind to make peace with the Taliban, or to seek an inclusive settlement.

Just as the US failed to build a nation in South Vietnam, with a cause equal to that of the North, the US-led West failed to do so in Afghanistan. Its preferred solutions, strategy and tactics did not work, or at least not well enough. The Taliban calculus might have changed if the West had signalled that it was there for the long haul, like Korea. They were more likely to commit to a political solution if faced with the prospect of a long-term military stalemate instead of using it as a ruse to buy time.

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, a failure to understand its allies, its enemy and the character of the conflict took Washington down the wrong road. In essence, it got the politics wrong. As in Vietnam, the US negotiated to enable retreat, not victory, with the avoidance of casualties the main driver of its (dis)engagement.

The West also failed to appreciate the extent to which Afghanistan's politics were personal and tribal rather than national, and the degree to which regional influences matter. Geography matters, and more so in Afghanistan given the ethnic allegiances that cut across borders and the patchwork of regional economic interests. This should not excuse Afghans' own role in their misfortune, or Washington's preference to ignore the obvious political frailties as it sought to paper together a cohesive Afghan system without a peace settlement.

The failure to think things through from the start to the finish can be seen in the chaotic nature of the withdrawal. The West's attempts to escape its moral obligation to the people of Afghanistan will have consequences, not least in the value of its promises, and certainly not least to the millions

of women now at the mercy of the Taliban's theocracy. This impact on Western authority is compounded by history. Islam was instrumentalised and weaponised by the US to help to bring down the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The West also failed to bring about a change in governance norms. The collapse of the Afghan National Army, discussed in detail in the preceding chapter, is the most obvious case of this failing. The foundational problems of ethnic division and recruitment, administration, leadership and the political will to fight for a common cause undid its *esprit de corps*. 'An ethnically Tajik Afghan soldier from Mazar-i-Sharif tasked to fight in the heavily Pashtun Helmand province would find himself as foreign there as any American,' writes Elliot Ackerman.[1] 'We never managed to integrate tribal and regional loyalties into a national army. Had we done so, the Afghan security forces would have been built on a far stronger foundation.' The effects of this fractured foundation were compounded by weak governance: in a word, corruption.

The corruption went all the way up the political chain, from a lowly soldier who had to pay a percentage of his salary to his local commander, to those at the top, including those in senior national security and administrative positions at the Arg. The method of their corruption was to influence various appointments at the levels of governor from which they would then slice a percentage of the rent that was extracted from customs and other 'fees'.

With the resignation of Mohammad Hanif Atmar as National Security Advisor in 2018, the corruption worsened as Ghani was reportedly increasingly estranged from the day-to-day running of the country. 'Whatever the institutional faults of the army and lack of professionalism and its divided loyalties,' says Ahmad Massoud, 'Afghanistan should not have fallen apart in the manner and speed that it did. For this, the leadership bears a big part of the responsibility for their lack of connection to the people.'[2]

This system is used to explain why policy-makers sought to influence the candidates for key positions in the richer trading provinces and around the border posts, or in ministries ripe with opportunities for corruption. As Aziz Amin, Ghani's former personal secretary, puts it, 'While others were working, they were robbing people of their resources.'[3] While this moral

failure contributed to the collapse, the fault cannot solely be laid at the door of the Afghans.

US signalling that it was on its way out at any cost made it complicit in the collapse. The pressure on the structure was increased to the point of collapse, however, by politics. While the speed of collapse was unpredictable, the causes were clear: the indifference of politicians to the human impact of their decisions, especially presidents Trump and Biden. Trump's insistence on US bilateral negotiations with the Taliban from which the Afghan President and Government were excluded continued with Biden. 'We need also to look to the role of [US peace envoy Zalmay] Khalilzad. Afghanistan was weakened by his peace process in that it side-lined the government. I told him,' recalls Massoud, son of the former mujahideen commander, 'that what he was doing would hand Afghanistan to the Taliban and would have a demoralising effect. Afghans, and especially those in the Army, felt betrayed after eighteen years of fighting alongside the US.'[4]

The Doha Agreement humiliated and undermined Ghani's already tenuous authority and reputation. The situation was not helped by interlocutors within the Arg shielding him from the reality of the security situation on the ground, especially those in the National Security Council and Chief of Government's offices.

The manner of the US-led withdrawal mattered too. Not only did Biden carry out Trump's over-hasty and dangerous plan with enthusiasm, but the decision to end all air support led to a total disintegration of morale when Afghans realized they had been betrayed. They then defaulted to what regional warlords have done in Afghanistan for centuries—cutting deals with the advancing Taliban and retreating into the villages.[5]

Ambassador Khalilzad was intimately involved with US foreign policy on Afghanistan. Born in Mazar-e-Sharif and raised in Kabul, Khalilzad came to the US as a high school exchange student, studying at the University of Chicago. Closely identified with the neo-conservative movement in the US, he 'midwifed the country's Loya Jirga* in Bonn, oversaw the drafting of the Afghan constitution and the country's first elections, going on to serve as President George W. Bush's ambassador to both Iraq and the United Nations.'

He has responded to criticism over his role and the manner of the US departure along with questions as to whether the US might have done things

differently, including whether it should have pushed earlier for an inclusive peace deal, by stating 'Yes, I reflect on those, and I will reflect on them for some time to come.'[6] (He did not respond to our request for an interview for this book.)

There may, to answer the question posed above, be a silver lining to the transition to Taliban rule, the value of which, at this early stage, is difficult to discern. The Taliban took control of a reasonable infrastructure and control of a government system—such as it is—with hardly a shot fired. This has significantly reduced the humanitarian cost, and that of rebuilding the country.

There is also a relatively connected software—digital and human—which did not exist before 2001. For all the scenes of chaos and collapse in Afghanistan, there has been undoubted progress in the country's development over the past twenty years as a consequence of the international mission. By 2020, one-third of the administration comprised women; education had been transformed by including girls and in turning to a syllabus comprising a little less religion and more modernity; literacy had doubled, and 90% of the country's 37 million people enjoyed access to communication services by 2014,[7] whereas two decades previously fewer than 30,000 Afghans had a mobile phone.[8] The Taliban had unplugged Afghanistan from the world; twenty years later, it was back online—although the Taliban quickly began undoing some of this legacy by returning to old policies after their return to power.

The expectations of those educated in this period have correspondingly evolved, including expectations of their own government. Even the Taliban has been forced to acknowledge the impact of such changes. As its spokesperson Suhail Shaheen observed in June 2021 when pressed on the history of discrimination against women, for example, 'At that time it was a war situation … we are not against the basic rights of women, that is their education and their work … because we are an Islamic society, they have to observe the Islamic hijab.'[9]

In this sense, the international intervention did not fail: rather, it was incomplete. 'A lot has changed in twenty years,' Mohammad Daoud Sultanzoy, the mayor of Kabul, said in 2021, 'and yet nothing has changed.' It is incomplete because the objectives—including those of vague concepts of stabilisation and optimisation—were dangerously aspirational and

misaligned to the limits of external patience, the tolerance of alliances and overall wherewithal.

The failure in Afghanistan has to point to the inevitable conclusion that intervention demands that outsiders remain clear-sighted in their objectives, and understand the limits of their agency. Insiders, for their part, are now likely to draw the obvious conclusions that outsiders will leave; that they must never trust a US government's promises; and that they must keep their options open and give as many people, groups and allies as possible a stake in success (including the Chinese, for example) and that they need to play outsiders against each other, and recognise that country-to-country relationships are more enduring than government-to-government engagement. Ideally these are not lessons we would have wanted others to draw from our debacle, but they are nothing if not rational conclusions—for allies as much as for local partners.

Assessing the Wider Cost and Implications

One cost of the US collapse in South Vietnam was the inspiration it provided to insurgencies throughout the rest of the world. Cambodia's government was overthrown by Pol Pot's murderous Khmer Rouge two weeks before Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces on 30 April 1975, and the monarchy in Laos fell to the communist Pathet Lao by the end of the year. And yet, just as Britain did not abandon its commitments to Europe after the 1938 Munich Conference with Hitler, the US did not forget its allies in Southeast Asia after the fall of Saigon.

The unruly retreat from Afghanistan has been, in the words of former US ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker, 'an enormous morale boost for Islamic radicals everywhere'.[10] A willingness to abandon Afghanistan does not mean that Africa too is strategically irrelevant. But it does demand questioning the approach taken in support of allies.[11] At the least, the betrayal of Afghans poses important questions for Africa, where governments are fighting wars against Islamic extremists in the Sahel, in the Horn and, more recently, in Mozambique.

Faced with an unprecedented wave of different but overlapping security crises from kidnapping to extremist insurgencies, countries in these regions are kept together by increasingly thin layers of political glue, desperately seeking a coherent strategy for containing mounting security threats and

extending governance. If anything, extremists in these countries have been encouraged by the Taliban advances in Afghanistan, just as their opponents have been disheartened by the abandonment of America's ally in Kabul. The jihadist centre of gravity, which has steadily been moving south from the Sahel through West Africa to Central Africa and more recently, down East Africa into Mozambique, is constantly expanding, fed by a diet of poverty, a rapidly expanding demographic, youth alienation combined with global connectivity, and careless government.

Somalia's Al-Shabab, for example, greeted the news of Kabul's collapse with a simple response: 'God is great'. Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of Al-Qaeda affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali, said of the Taliban's victory, 'We are winning,' drawing comparisons with France's decision at the same time to downsize its eight-year mission in Mali.[12]

Whether such a moral and political fillip will significantly affect the activity of jihadist groups is moot: their trajectories are more rooted in enduring local conflicts and circumstances.

By 2021, there were 60,000 UN peacekeepers with a budget of $6.4 billion in twelve multinational operations around the world: Central African Republic, Mali, Abyei in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Western Sahara, Kosovo, India/Pakistan, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus and the Golan Heights.[13] The largest peacekeeping mission in 2021 was AMISOM in Somalia, which was, however, the responsibility of the African Union rather than the UN, with nearly 20,000 peacekeepers. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was the second largest active peacekeeping mission with just over 17,000 military personnel involved, and MINURSMA in Mali with 15,000 personnel.

Evaluating the requirements for effective peace missions is not uncommon. For instance, to assess the UN's role in ensuring international peace and, a comprehensive review of UN Peace Operations was undertaken at the turn of this century. The resulting 2000 Brahimi Report outlined the need to strengthen the UN's capacity in order to be effective in peacekeeping operations. These recommendations included the need for increased financial support, improved force readiness, a focus on intelligence, and the need for closer integration of military, political, development, and human rights expertise.[14]

In stating the problem, the Brahimi Report noted, 'Over the last decade, the United Nations has repeatedly failed to meet the challenge, and it can do no better today. Without renewed commitment on the part of Member States, significant institutional change and increased financial support, the United Nations will not be capable of executing the critical peacekeeping and peace-building tasks that the Member States assign to it in coming months and years.'

Noting then that the UN 'has bitterly and repeatedly discovered over the last decade [that] no amount of good intentions can substitute for the fundamental ability to project credible force if complex peacekeeping, in particular, is to succeed … force alone cannot create peace; it can only create the space in which peace may be built.'

Brahimi subsequently questioned the sequencing of elections before ensuring the conditions for peace. 'Elections,' he reflects, 'do not unite you. They divide you. The same could be said for forcing a constitution; rather you should give the locals the time to develop their own model.'[15] Or as President Muse Bihi Abdi of Somaliland says about the approach taken there, 'One of our advantages was that we had a local constitution.' The bottom-up success of Somaliland contrasts with the top-down failure of the model in south-central Somalia. 'Aid,' he says, 'can be a curse, depending on how you use it.'

The hugely experienced Fink Haysom, who worked as Nelson Mandela's legal adviser before joining the UN system and serving across a variety of conflict settings, says that the environment for mediation has become more complex given the proliferation of actors, government and non-governmental, the number of new agendas, the erosion of international consensus around a 'liberal peace' given, especially, the rise of authoritarianism, and the related shift in the balance of power from internal to external actors.

'It's difficult to find a formula to make peace when those around the table are not those making the decisions,' he observes. To get back to the basics of making peace, he advises avoiding 'timebound conditionalities which, in an asymmetrical conflict such as Iraq or Afghanistan, plays in favour of the insurgent', and to 'put peace upfront' instead of a plethora of 'new conditionalities' from climate change to transitional justice which demand 'prophets, not mediators'.[16]

* * *

There are no easy answers to these challenges, even with the benefit of hindsight. Indeed, Sir John Scarlett, former head of MI-6 and chairman of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee, told us bluntly that 'If someone says they know exactly what we should be doing now, this is almost certainly likely to be incorrect today, as it was in 2001. But inevitably, given that they controls [sic] the territory, one has to talk to the Taliban, not least in finding a way to managing [sic] the people-to-people consequences of what has happened…'[17]

And yet the demand for external assistance for stabilisation, and development, is likely to continue. The strategic design of international missions is of particular relevance to Africa. The continent, just 14 kilometres from Europe across the Gibraltar strait, is in the throes of a societal and demographic revolution which, without a shift from the business-as-usual practices of its polity and the policy of outsiders, can only further stress its politics and stability. At the same time, some of the answers come from Africa.

From Afghanistan to Africa?

Over a generation, Africa's population is projected to double to 2.5 billion. The numbers are startling. At current rates of growth, Nigeria's population will increase to over 400 million, while Tanzania's, currently 53 million, will grow to the same size as that of Russia at 137 million. Kenya's population will more than double to 95 million, while Uganda's will balloon from 43 million to 106 million. Almost 60% of Africa's population is under the age of twenty-five, making it the youngest continent. The median age in Africa was 19.8 in 2020, with Niger at just 15.1. By 2100, at current rates, Africa's youth population would be double the entire population of Europe. Most of this increase will take place in its cities, which will accommodate over half of African citizens by 2030. Sixty years ago, that figure was just 10%.

According to the 2020 African Youth Survey, for example, nearly two-thirds of Africans aged 18–25 feel today that their countries are moving in the wrong direction.[18] Only one in six is in stable wage employment,[19] and just 75% of them are literate—the lowest of any region globally.[20] And yet,

according to the 2018 Ibrahim Index of African Governance, half of the continent's fifty-five countries registered a deterioration in education outcomes between 2013 and 2017.[21] Unemployment, social media connectivity, and radical ideologies could prove a potent and volatile security and political mix. Today's policy decisions will help to determine whether Africa's youth will be an asset or burden to their societies.

Africa—and especially sub-Saharan Africa—has not kept pace with the volume of people entering its job market. Investment and economic growth are too low, reflecting conditions of poor governance and political instability. Africa's share of global foreign direct investment lingers around 3.5% of an annual amount of $1.5 trillion; yet its share of the global population is almost 17%. Developing Asia received, by comparison, $512 billion in 2018 FDI, or nearly 40% of the total, closer to its global population share of 60%.[22]

Figure 5.1

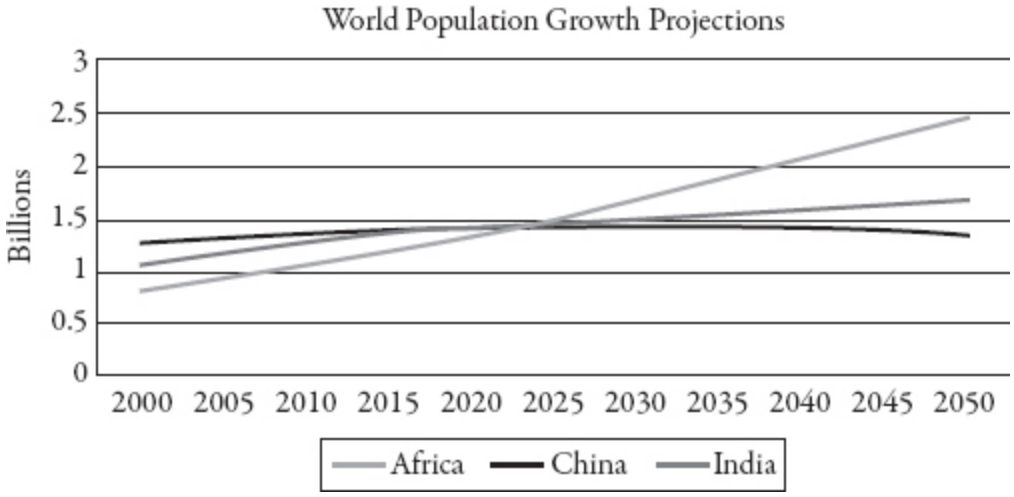
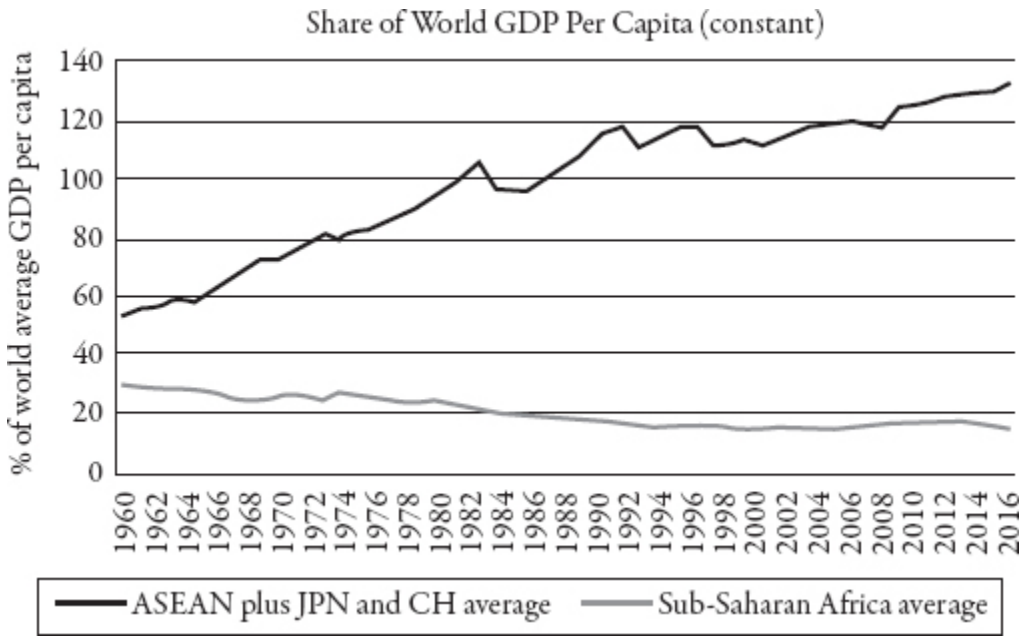


Figure 5.2



This is starkly portrayed by Figure 5.2 which reflects the rise (and fall) of Africa's per capita income relative to East Asia, a region which acquired its independence at around the same time as Africa's.

The presence of more people in the job market can, in the current policy environment, only suppress wages and further diminish work opportunities. If handled with a fresh approach, this rapidly increasing young potential workforce, in a world that is elsewhere becoming older, could become a demographic dividend, as was the case in East Asia over the last half century. But this will demand that African governments, and their partners, prepare adequately for the change. Such a governance response, fit for purpose and up to the challenge, has hitherto been lacking across much of Africa.

Africa's record of governance, for instance, and its improvement, is patchy at best. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows[23] that Africa's average overall governance score in 2017 (49.9 out of 100.0) is just one point higher than it was in 2008, showing that it is failing to keep up with population growth and, in particular, the changing youth demographic.[24]

Thirty-four countries, home to 72% of Africans, improved their governance performance over the ten years from 2008, while the remainder experienced a decline in governance in some eighteen countries. The improvement is driven most notably by fifteen countries, home to almost

half of Africa's population, including Kenya, Morocco and Côte d'Ivoire, which have shown particularly large moves in terms of ranking between 2008 and 2017.

The ability of outsiders to consolidate progress and counter decline has proven to be problematic in such circumstances.

Take the case of Mali, which has suffered systemic instability during the last decade despite considerable international assistance. Mali's struggle against various jihadist groups in its northern and central regions has been assisted since 2013 by French troops and a UN peacekeeping mission. Their ability to provide support has been made much more difficult by a weak central government and the poorly trained and ill-equipped army.[25]

The Sahel country transitioned to democracy in 1991 after a long period of military rule. It was a donor darling during this democratic phase. While the toppling of Muammar Ghaddafi in nearby Libya is commonly taken as the reason for Mali's subsequent collapse, the reasons are more complex. The depth of corruption was one of the reasons why the Touareg rebellion of 2012—which sought autonomy for the northern region—was badly mismanaged. Moreover, the country was essentially split in terms of the focus of governance; 90% of Mali's population lives in the southern areas. They don't really care much about the north.

The Touareg rebellion in the north led to an 'accidental' coup in 2012. Soldiers marching on the presidential palace demanding more pay, found that President Amadou Toumani Touré (known as 'ATT') had fled. As a result, the French armed forces launched Opération Serval in January 2013, helping to bring some order to the country, while being active elsewhere in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger since that time.

The French force in Mali was bolstered by not less than 15,000 UN uniformed personnel by 2020. Still, the challenges did not disappear with ATT, and nor has the presence of so many foreign troops been able to prevent the collapse of governance and, in 2020 and 2021, government again.

Following the collapse of the government in April 2019, Mali's president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, was ousted in a military coup in August 2020 following mass protests against his rule over corruption, the mismanagement of the economy and a dispute over legislative elections.

A combination of criminality, the smuggling of people and contraband, tribal enmities and jihadist elements has made running Mali seemingly

impossible. All of this is exacerbated by the increase in population as well as climate change. Mali is projected to increase its population from 20 million in 2020 to 44 million by 2050.

It's not only about national numbers, but also where people will be living.

The population of Mali's capital, Bamako, doubled in size to more than two million people in just seven years during the early part of the 21st Century as a result of political instability, and it has been growing at a steady 4% annually. It is not alone. Niger, to Mali's east, will go from 24 million people in 2020 to more than 68 million, a 20-fold projected population increase since independence in 1960. This helps to explain the answer by Malian and Niger politicians to the question: What is the greatest economic challenge you face? Their response: 'Security'.[26]

Ensuring an integrated solution that encompasses political power, economic opportunity, and social development is necessary. There has been very limited progress on the political aspect, as a result of which the state has been unable to re-establish its presence in the form of schools and police posts in large swathes of territory. There was relatively little in the way of government capacity to fill the governance vacuum. Indeed, this failure has caused the government itself in Bamako to falter, leading to the collapses-cum-coups of 2012, 2020 and 2021. Instability has become institutionalised.

In May 2021, following the second coup in nine months, French President Emmanuel Macron threatened that France would withdraw troops from Mali if political instability there led to greater Islamist radicalisation. At the same time, the jihadists were becoming increasingly active in the Sahel and neighbouring regions. If France was to leave out of pique over the military takeovers in Mali and Chad, there is a fear of Islamist militancy becoming even more rampant.

'We can't do it for the Malian government' remarked a senior French diplomat at the Quai d'Orsay in 2019. 'We can't act on behalf of the Malian parliament.' And, so it has proven. Yet the international community continues to try and provide security in the hope that somehow a peace—a political solution—can be manufactured and grafted onto the local scene.

Reinforcing Success, Rewarding Failure?

Set up in January 2007, the UN-mandated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) superseded the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development Peace Support Mission in Somalia. In March 2007, Ugandan military personnel arrived in Somalia, operationalising AMISOM. By July 2010, soon after deadly bombings by Al-Shabaab in Kampala, the African Union agreed to widen AMISOM's mandate from peacekeeping to peace enforcement in order to engage the radical Islamist movement.

This was driven, it seemed, by several core assumptions: Mogadishu would eventually fill the political space created by international military gains; Al-Shabaab would be militarily defeated; the international community could be co-ordinated; AMISOM would hand over security to a national army, which would ensure governance in the national interest; and, international, regional and Somali national interests could be aligned.

The mission grew quickly, as once more did foreign support.

UN Security Council Resolution 1964 of 22 December 2010 took AMISOM from 7,650 troops to 12,000, and Security Council Resolution 2035 of 22 February 2012 to 17,731. This made AMISOM the largest UN-mandated peacekeeping mission in the world. In addition, the UN Security Council extended the AMISOM mandate for a further nine months in May 2020, requiring a gradual hand-over of responsibility to Somali forces by 2021.

The international aid regime, more or less, kept pace. Under the New Deal Compact for Somalia, signed in Brussels in September 2013, donors began to sing from the same peacebuilding hymn sheet. By the start of 2020, Somalia was receiving more than $1 billion annually to keep the peace and build domestic security and other governance systems.[27]

The assumption that, with time and ladles of international assistance, Somalia could be stabilised and international, regional and local interests constructively aligned, has not so far proved to be correct.

Ultimately, the success of the AMISOM commitment will depend on the extent of local ownership of the reasons for failure and thus the solution.

The contemporary threats to Somali security can be grouped into three different but related clusters, all of which are internally generated: first, Al-Shabaab, the Al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist movement that has fed off a cocktail of lawlessness, religious ideology and youth frustration. A second has been the absence of government and governance, allowing private militias to go relatively unchecked at the local level. Third, this situation is

related to the most intractable problem in contemporary Somalia: the clan system. Once a basis of social stability and consensus, it is now a basis of power and control outside of government.

In the assessment of one international official in 2020, the UN 'is not getting much dividend off $4 billion in security assistance over the last twelve years. Instead, Al-Shabaab is deep in revenue collection countrywide, and even within the government in Mogadishu itself.'[28] Rather than aligning its interests with the people of Somalia, the principles of political survival around individuals and clan identities prevails, with a sedentary attitude towards governance. This has not been helped by increasing donor fragmentation, or regional factionalism: with Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea all playing to their own interests over those of Somalia. Some see the core assumption of a self-governing, economically viable and secure Somalia as a threat.

At the heart of the challenge is that Mogadishu is run 'by an elite, wealthy and in a position of authority, trying to govern a country where they don't have much reach or influence, and where they are not identified as Somalis. Moreover, these characters are often transient: they will extract as much money as they can for as long as possible and then go back to live their lives in Birmingham or Minnesota.'

None of this should be particularly surprising as the key challenge for Somalis over the past thirty-five years has been their physical survival, explaining why those with access to power are inclined to use it for their own ends.

Over time, various foreign missions have provided endlessly squabbling Somali politicians with continuous payoffs, disincentivising reaching a lasting settlement. The denial of food to starving compatriots in order to gain cash and control power for themselves, at the time of both Operation Restore Hope (a US-led, UN-sanctioned initiative to deliver humanitarian assistance in the south) and again during the 2012 famine, shows the depths to which some Somali community leaders have been prepared to sink.

Somali society is sufficiently resilient and endowed with support mechanisms outside the state (for example, through the remittance nexus offered by a remarkably effective mobile phone network and the large Somali diaspora) that enable people to survive without a state far better than many other peoples can manage with one. In fact, some have prospered

precisely because of its absence, and corruption is part of that survival process.

Translating these areas of efficiency into national governance has proven so far elusive, in part because there are three sources of power and authority: the international community through AMISOM, the clans and the government. The problem with Somalia is, says Muse Bihi Abdi, the leader of the breakaway country of Somaliland to the north (himself a former officer in the Somali Air Force), 'that no person has governed Somalia in thinking about their people. Rather they are thinking about their pocket'.[29]

Changing Outside Strategy

General Sir Nick Carter argues that the success of any peacebuilding mission depends on a number of conditions: working with the germ of a local solution—the role of outsiders being to reinforce rather than to lead; avoiding short-term responses and thinking things through; building real understanding, underpinned by reliable relationships; building up local capacity; and viewing the solution as more than just money, which, incorrectly applied, can simply drive 'bad behaviour'.[30]

As an outsider, it is next to impossible to work against the grain of a foreign country. But what does this mean in practice?

Take the example of supporting Somaliland over trying to prop up Somalia.

* * *

A dirty, white, bullet-pocked house, without electricity and running water, barely merits a second glance in Burao, a town high in the east of Somaliland. Yet, this former colonial governor's residence, shaded by a giant acacia, was the site of the Grand Conference of the Northern Peoples in Burao, held over six weeks, which concluded with the declaration of Somaliland's independence from Somalia on 18 May 1991.

Since then, Somalilanders have stuck with a winning formula, despite the absence of international recognition and the tepid democratic enthusiasm of much of the Horn of Africa.

Only Somaliland among the Horn of African countries is not ranked as 'unfree' (with a score of 42/100, where 100 is the maximum 'freedom'

achievable) on Freedom House's political rights and civil liberty rankings. Ethiopia (22), Djibouti (24) and Somalia (7) are all listed as 'unfree', the same as Uganda (34), Rwanda (21), Burundi (14), Egypt (18), Sudan (17), South Sudan (2) and Eritrea (2) in the next regional ring. Only Kenya (48) to the south enjoys 'partly free' status.[31]

Somaliland uses democracy to keep its people together. Its steady democratic performance and progress is a breath of fresh air in a continent which by comparison is an uphill struggle for democrats.

Only seven countries of 49 in sub-Saharan Africa were, by 2021, in the 'free' category. This was the lowest figure since 1991, with under 10% of the population of the continent as a result living in countries classified by Freedom House as 'free'.

The reasons are simple. Incumbents have little interest in changing things, even though a vast majority of Africans regularly polled prefer democracy to other forms of government, despite the popularity among elites of the big-man thesis.

Somaliland also shows that you do not have to be rich to be democratic. Despite a tiny national budget of just $250 million for its 3.5 million people and a tough geography and hostile climate, Somaliland is showing much richer countries how to do it.

'A place that has made something out of virtually nothing' is how the former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, describes the progress made by Somaliland. His trip there in May 2019 was the first by an African president, current or past, since the territory re-declared its independence in May 1991.[32]

In June 1960, Somaliland gained its initial independence from Britain before making an ill-fated decision to join former Italian Somalia five days later in a union that was envisaged ultimately to include French Somalia (now Djibouti), the Somali-dominated Ogaden region of Ethiopia (now Region 5) and a chunk of northern Kenya—the regions denoted by the five-pointed star on the Somali flag.

In the centre of the capital, Hargeisa, is the independence memorial, comprising a MiG-17 fighter-bomber erected on a plinth. This commemorates the event when, having lost control of the province, Siad Barre—the third president of Somalia—ordered his air force, operating from the local airport, to bomb the city, which had been briefly captured by the local Somali National Movement (SNM) liberation fighters in May

1988. Flown by Rhodesian mercenaries, among others, these aircraft dropped bombs that resulted in many thousands of civilian casualties.

By the time of Siad Barre's fall three years later, the main cities of Hargeisa and Burao had been razed to the ground. Not for nothing was Hargeisa known as the 'roofless city' after systemic looting by Mogadishu had stripped it of roof sheeting and even doors and their frames.

Somalilanders have since sought stability on the principle of maximum ownership and the reality of minimum resources.

Peace did not require vast external financing. There was none available anyway at the time. In fact, the absence of outsiders may be precisely the reason for its success, at least compared to its southern neighbour, Somalia, which has lurched violently from peace conference to initiative, peacekeeping mission to external military intervention, and failing government to fragile coalition, seemingly with little discernible progress. In Somalia, 'conflict entrepreneurs' have fed off both the fighting and the talking in a top-down process financed by donors and mostly taking place outside the country.

Somaliland's peace conferences were, by contrast, managed and financed by locals, bringing their own food and shelter. Such dialogue, long a feature of Somaliland society, was organic, bottom-up rather than top-down. Somalilanders concentrated on achieving peace, not on acquiring comforts and financial rents for delegates from a peace process. Despite its obvious dysfunctionality, Somalia somehow refuses to countenance Somaliland's right to divorce, clinging chauvinistically to the notion that the marriage can be repaired. And Africa blindly stumbles on with hopes for reunion and fears of the wider impact of accepting the current two-state reality.

The recovery since has similarly demanded persistence and the principle of inclusion.

The former British protectorate has developed a stable, democratic system of politics, merging modern and traditional elements. In 2002, Somaliland made the transition from a clan-based system to a multi-party democracy after a 2001 referendum, formalising the Guurti as an Upper House of Elders, which secures the support of traditional clan-based power structures.

There have since been regular elections and a frequent turnover of power between the main political parties. The 2003 presidential election

was won by Dahir Riyale Kahin by just 80 votes in a poll of nearly half a million, defeating Ahmed Mohamoud Silanyo.

The tables were turned in 2010, with Silanyo winning 49% of the vote to his opponent's 33%. Muse Bihi Abdi, a former SNM fighter, who had earlier served as a Soviet-trained fighter pilot in the Somali Air Force, was elected in November 2017, receiving 55% of the vote, becoming the country's fifth president, and cementing a tradition of peaceful handovers of power that are rare in the region.

On 31 May 2021, around the 30th anniversary of Somaliland's independence and the 20th anniversary of its multi-party democracy, and despite Covid-19, the parliamentary and local district elections went off smoothly, with 1.1 million voters registered by the National Electoral Commission (NEC), and the establishment of 2,709 polling stations countrywide.

Unlike Somaliland's previous six elections, which were mostly funded by outsiders, 70% of the $8 million budget was financed internally. And despite delays in the election, caused by a standoff between the presidency and opposition parties over the nomination of members of the NEC, and challenges with the iris biometric voter registration system, this was the most competitive poll yet, with 246 candidates standing for 82 parliamentary seats and 966 for 249 district municipality posts across the six regions.

A lack of wealth does not mean instability. Somaliland is synonymous with grinding poverty and dirt-scrabble hardship. A high percentage of the population is illiterate, requiring assistance at the polls, many of which were run by university students. The slow pace of voting was accompanied by constant grumbling on a high Somali volume setting, but with no violence or obvious intimidation.

Regardless, the enthusiasm was palpable, not least among the very old and young. Preference was patiently given to disabled and women voters. A voting age of 15 might seem low, and a cynical way of vote-stealing, but it serves as a de-radicalising mechanism for the largest demographic: 70% of Somaliland's 3.5 million population is under the age of 30. The younger generation sees democracy as a means of diluting the impact of the clan system. The crowds were not voting just for political parties; they voted for nationhood and the pride of self-determination.

In comparison to today's security environment—from cyber-threats to the rise of authoritarians, the threat of populism and radical extremism, disintegration of regional alliances, trade wars, the integrity of elections, and the impacts of pandemics—2001 seems comparatively simple and certainly naïve by comparison.

This makes large-scale interventionism in pursuit of grand strategic objectives less likely; more so is the carefully calibrated response of the type that characterised the fight against ISIS in northern Iraq. The focus is almost inescapably on prevention and proactive reform, rather than fixing failure.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations between 2000 and 2008. In 2012 he chaired President François Hollande's review of France's defence and national security posture, before being appointed Deputy Joint Special Envoy for Syria by the United Nations and the Arab League. While he believes that 'the Afghan debacle will reinforce—probably excessively—the growing scepticism on overly ambitious state-building missions', it could also encourage some missions to become much more focused and 'trigger some new thinking on security sector reform'. Depending on whether Afghanistan evolves 'into a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups or not', this may, he notes, 'lead to a re-evaluation of the theory that the security of Western nations depends on making sure that fragile states are friendly states.'[33]

Afghanistan has, however, reinforced the difference between counter-terrorism operations and attempts at nation-building. As François Hollande asked of the proposed intervention into Mali in January 2013, 'Why should we do it?', the question is highly relevant for operations elsewhere, especially after Afghanistan. 'We can't build Denmark in Afghanistan,' notes one French diplomat, 'this has to be done by Afghans. That is, 'he adds, 'only if they want to.' As a consequence, the Quai d'Orsay went into a 'frenzy of calls' with possible African troop contributing nations, including Nigeria, South Africa and Côte d'Ivoire, concluding that 'no-one was able, capable and willing to do it.'[34]

The default notion of 'African solutions for African problems' has, however, been hollowed out by the consistent lack of results including the

various initiatives of the African Union, which has not kept up with either military demands and the management of political shenanigans. This includes the growing jihadist threat as well as civil conflicts, such as that which erupted in Ethiopia in 2020, fed by growing internal divisions and regional interests. The complexity of the Ethiopian conflict, combined with great power differences and the scarring over the Rwanda genocide among other international failures, makes it highly unlikely that an international intervention will take place there.

The chaotic collapse of the Kabul government and the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan should encourage African governments to assume greater responsibility for their own security, while at the same time focusing external assistance on enablers: intelligence, air assets and training. It should also encourage the will to engineer diplomatic solutions to similar crises, while highlighting several military and strategic lessons, including the imperative to do the following:

Set realistic goals: The West's strategy in Afghanistan was flawed and unachievable from the start. Carbon copy attempts to emulate the democracy-plus-Western-style military operations formula for peacebuilding are doomed to fail. In practical terms, this requires not trying to defend everywhere, but consolidation.

In governance terms, the country where stability is attempted should be placed on a realistic trajectory toward representative government, not dumped in a democracy. On the military front, rather than emulating the hugely expensive, high-tech way of war of great powers whose resources and technical assets are simply unavailable to them, African governments need to focus on giving existing forces an edge over adversaries while retaining locally appropriate ways of operating.

In this context small, subtle changes—better health and welfare support, cheap but reliable radios, locally-sustainable logistics and maintenance methods—are likely to pay more dividends than copy-catting allies. The result may be a military that looks and fights a lot like the adversary but operates just that little bit more effectively and ethically.

Avoid set-piece positions and grand slogans: This includes the avoidance of simplistic phrases such as 'rebuild the state' and 'build democracy'. Rather there is a need for a clear idea of what is achievable, at what cost, and the risks involved.

Understand and deal with your enemy: War represents a failure of politics, thus defeating any insurgency is only accomplished not by attempting to crush it but by understanding one's foes and devising a political solution based on a search for common interests. The critical failure of many in Afghanistan was not to make a political settlement with the Taliban after their crushing defeat. This is not a military problem, but a national (and international) one for all the world's democracies. To be successful, you need to get into the head of the other side, and be as well informed as is possible in knowing with whom and what you are dealing, what the objectives of the various players are, and their local and regional alliance structures.

Assume external assistance to be fleeting and probably corrosive: Aid programmes can fuel conflict, in part by undermining the accountability and rule of law strictures on which the extension of government depends. The corruption and wastage in Afghanistan that the West now decries, was not only permitted, but fuelled by the very nature of Western aid programmes. The idea behind them was that a surge of expenditure would enable a rapid exit. There was also squander and waste on projects that were peripheral to the core mission in-country, as described below with regard to gender programmes, but critical to maintaining political buy-in and support in the providing nations.

Civilian and military programmes have to be carefully knitted together, no doubt, but there needs to be some triage: for instance, macro-economic fundamentals including currency stability and liquidity, healthcare and education systems, and the provision of supplies of water and electricity.

Appreciate that peace-making must be a regional undertaking: A favourable regional environment is critical for any peace-making initiative to be successful. The West's presence in Afghanistan proved to be a liability in this regard, since it was unwilling (or unable) to coerce Pakistan, in particular, which has historically provided succour to the Taliban as it was vulnerable to the supply route running through this neighbour. The same went for Iran, given wider political and security differences. In the aftermath of the withdrawal, China is likely to be a major player in Afghanistan, along with Iran and Russia.

Employ the right tools for the job: Sophisticated Western helicopters and other air assets which the locals cannot maintain are more of a hindrance than a help. The rules for external actors and local recipients

alike are: keep a small foreign footprint, deliver enablers (including transport, logistics support), never want it more than they do, and let the locals do the fighting and take the lead.

Increasingly crucial is the need to find more practical means to help to create a suitable and sustainable indigenous armed force. At the end, in Afghanistan, the police and much of the army were only useful for distributing largesse; the fighting was done by a force about 10% of the total. Building an appropriate local armed force is about more than the numbers; it also demands attention to the systems of healthcare, education and pensions—areas that are most likely to ensure loyalty.

Humility matters: The West may best assist African countries threatened by insurgencies by supporting their nascent efforts at democratisation and institution building, and not (for example) by portraying this assistance as part of a denial strategy aimed at China. Partnerships that are worthy of the name must be founded with humility and after an assessment of African needs, rather than Western concerns and interests. Africans have tired of international political games and aid regimes that speak about the retention of power without scrutiny of past failings, and have not delivered lasting development in their societies.[35]

Control your own fate: 'Everyone,' says the son of the deposed vice-president Amrullah, 'knows that Afghanistan was sold out in the name of a US-TB deal.'[36] Yet the Afghans are not blameless, even though the West bears a huge responsibility, in large part for failing to understand the very nature of Afghanistan and the region, and arrogantly assuming its ways were best.

Military assets are important, but more so is the will to fight, built on a strong connection to society and a willingness to defend society's values. Solutions to such problems require thinking differently and must be based on reinforcing progress rather than trying to invest in success and, in so doing, simply provide a feast for local elites.

* * *

The quickest way to end a war, wrote George Orwell, is to lose it. Equally, the easiest way to solve state failure is not to let it happen. But winning wars, like preventing state failure, requires more than military means. It fundamentally requires understanding why economies have performed so

poorly, why opportunities are so few and deeply contested, and how to achieve, essentially, a political solution.

James Robinson and Daron Acemoglu argue in *Why Nations Fail* that development success or failure is down to the difference between extractive and inclusive political economies.[37] In inclusive institutions there are, they note, secure property rights, law and order, freer markets and the correct type of state support, the upholding of contracts, and the right overall environment for business to prosper. In short, this creates incentives for investment and innovation across a level playing field.[38]

By contrast, in the extractive model, politically connected elites have preferential economic access to resources. The playing field is not level, and the checks and balances are not there, with weak and unbalanced political institutions. Overall, there is a lack of pluralism, and an unclear contract between government and the governed. The difference between wealth and poverty, they argue, is in the system characterised by a narrow concentration of power, which enables elites to rule at their own benefit at the expense of their populations. It follows that prosperity is more likely where power is more broadly distributed, and where government is accountable and responsive to the needs of citizens.

The international effort in Afghanistan lost sight of such principled goals of peace and inclusion in its diffused efforts to build a better society. For example, according to a report of the (US) Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), $787 million, for example, was spent on gender programmes, though that figure understates the overall total 'since gender goals were folded into practically every undertaking America made in the country.'

The benefits of this direction are dubious. A focus on gender roles and male attitudes hardly created an Afghanistan that the recipients of this expert knowledge were willing to fight for. Gender quotas apparently did not help the search for great efficiency and national consensus. On the contrary, the focus on 'gender ideology included in American aid routinely caused rebellions out in the provinces, directly causing the instability America was supposedly fighting.'[39]

In a Taliban-run Afghanistan, a return to these basics of peace-making, of peace and stability, will require a focus on the provision of humanitarian and technical assistance in attempting to get key services and institutions working to prevent, for example, the total collapse of the banking system.

But such interventions can never simply be more than a band-aid in the absence of a political environment that will attract, develop, retain and usefully employ skills to make things work, keep investment flowing, and maintain the peace.

Practical success stories and good examples are there for those outsiders seeking to get insiders to do their jobs better. Somaliland's commitments to improving democratic norms and standards, and its regular change of leaders at the polls, have made it a regional democratic superpower. Rather than trying to manufacture success in Somalia, outsiders would be much better off recognising Somaliland and reinforcing domestic success where it already exists.

That much is a lesson in Afghanistan as elsewhere, including in Africa.

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* A Loya Jirga, or 'grand assembly' in Pashtu, is a national gathering which can number up to 3,000 delegates bringing together representatives from various Afghan ethnic, religious, and tribal communities. The centuries-old institution has been convened at times of national crisis or to settle national issues. Historically, it has been used to approve a new constitution, declare war, choose a new king, or to make sweeping social or political reforms.

CONCLUSION

THE LEDGER—LESSONS FROM FAILURE IN AFGHANISTAN

'One by one we're going to find [Al-Qaeda and the Taliban] and piece by piece we'll tear their terrorist network apart.'

President George W Bush[1]

'They believe in a universe of divine justice where the human race is guilty of sin, but they also believe in a secular justice where human beings are presumed innocent. You can't have both.'

Viet Thanh Nguyen

The images of panicked Afghans camped out at Hamid Karzai International Airport are now ingrained in our collective consciences. The pathetic bundles of bloodied clothing left behind after a suicide bomber took the lives of another 200 Afghans and 13 American military personnel outside the airport, days before the 31 August withdrawal deadline, tell their story of foreboding and the collapse of hope.

More than 124,000 Afghans would eventually be evacuated, a remarkable effort under the chaotic circumstances, and given the egregiously botched planning of the evacuation mission. As thousands of veterans and private networks of concerned individuals strove to extract vulnerable Afghans, working around the clock, others—several of them in the White House—apparently had a different agenda. They were listing excuses as to why some would inevitably be left behind, and how the fight was being taken to the perpetrators of the airport bombing. Others, on cable news or in political opposition parties, began seeking, instantly and inevitably, to make domestic political capital from the debacle.

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One of the least attractive aspects of the Afghanistan post-mortem has been the victim blame-game. US politicians, from the president down, along with military and diplomatic 'leaders', have been some of the most contemptible in this regard, making repeated attempts to shift responsibility to the Afghans for everything that went wrong: soldiers who couldn't be trained to fight, politicians who were on the take, and leaders who were incompetent and egocentric to a fault.

Yet the one thing Afghans can do without any Western training is to fight, when they believe in their cause: the Taliban did, and so did many SOF units and a large portion of the regular Afghan army, right up until the moment when their political leaders left them nothing to fight for.[2] The Kabul government was indeed corrupt, like many governments in many parts of the world, but not uniquely so. There is thus plenty of blame to go around.

In our view, ten key factors explain why the international mission failed to bring stability and modernity to Afghanistan.

The West's Best Wasn't Good Enough. The lives of some 10,000 international troops, contractors and NGO workers and an estimated 200,000 Afghan civilians and military forces were insufficient to turn the tide against a highly motivated Taliban. This should not obscure the failure to insist from the outset that this was a long-term strategic undertaking involving far more than the toppling of the Taliban as the host of Al-Qaeda, and far more than mere counter-terrorism.

The usual excuse is that the United States became distracted by Iraq. This is perfectly true, but it does not explain why Afghanistan still could not be stabilised even when greater resources became available. As explained in Chapter 4, the tendency to transfer techniques from Iraq to Afghanistan and the mistaken notion—engendered by the unique circumstances of the Iraq surge and the Sunni awakening—that a magic set of COIN techniques could bring swift victory, were part of the problem. The fact that Western political leaders lacked a strategy, or the patience necessary to execute a longer war, or the moral fortitude to persuade their people that this was necessary, were other issues.

There Was No Single Campaign Plan. The plan evolved by iteration, subject to changes in personalities—of ambassadors, commanders and politicians. It also varied from nation to nation, from sector to sector across the reconstruction effort, and from province to province. The war was striking for the eclipse of strategy by operational art as it morphed from regime change to nation-building, counter-terrorism to counter-insurgency to security force assistance, with measures of success constantly reverse-engineered from a convenient subset of facts on the ground.

By operating this way, the West became little more than another localised warlord, albeit a large and powerful—if transient—one, to be managed, fought against, allied with, exploited to settle scores with local (and hence more important) enemies, and even co-operated with, both for resources and in the realisation that it would eventually leave.

The Absence of Political Leadership. Whatever the military failures, and these were legion, those of politicians, diplomats and aid agencies were spectacular by their relative invisibility. The past twenty years have been about the failure of politics: internationally, regionally, and internally, among Afghans. In particular, little energy was put into making regional peace until too late in the day, or for that matter, into peace with the Taliban in Afghanistan itself. If war is the result of a failure of politics, then politics is the only real means to end the fighting.

Solutions were Driven by Fear and a Misguided Search for Institutional Relevance. Not only did the West dramatically overestimate its own influence and agency, but the bureaucratic powerhouses of NATO, the UN, the Special Representative structure, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, donor conferences and a plethora of other US-dominated global institutions exacerbated this dynamic, supercharging the international actors' detachment, jargon and militarisation of their own self-interest. The chosen metrics suited the mission until that mission no longer suited the prevalent politics of its only real enabler, Washington.

Geography Trumped Goodwill. Not only did the Taliban prove to be a formidable and resourceful foe, they also received critical financial and material support from outside. Most of the neighbourhood had reason to resent and ultimately reject the Western presence. Pakistan's perception of

the West's role was, from the outset, shaped by what Islamabad saw as a US betrayal after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, leaving it with a civil war on its borders and four million Afghan refugees within them. Thereafter the US retreated, only to return, rebranding itself as an ally but issuing periodic menacing threats ('you are with us, or you are with the terrorists') after 9/11.

Afghanistan again became a casualty of greater strategic interests, including the complex relationship between the West and Pakistan, complicated by the Pakistan-India relationship, and, overall, Islamic sentiment towards a Western presence. Iran and the Central Asian countries initially wanted an end to instability and to maintain their own spheres of interest in Afghanistan; this changed as the West became mired in the struggle and the direction of US-Iran and US-Russia relations continued to sour.

The strategic sophistication of the final, 2021 Taliban offensive, designed to pressure Kabul by closing off access to its northern trading 'ports' into the 'Stans and forcing dependence on its southern routes via Pakistan, perfectly illustrates the pattern and extent of regional influences.

A Failure of Development Assistance. With a few exceptions, the measures of effectiveness for aid agencies became centred on the volume of expenditure rather than the outcomes achieved, fuelling massive corruption, fraud, waste and abuse. Since the vast majority of jobs in developing countries are in the private sector, there is a need to work out exactly what this sector requires to succeed.

Afghanistan showed that aid programmes are, by and large, antithetical to economic development since they are often led by those who apparently neither understand nor particularly like business. The traditional route of an entrepreneur with a good idea—borrowing money and starting a business—was lost in the flood of easy money, where entrepreneurial talent was diverted from creating new enterprises to cynically tapping the more than $100 billion in soft donor money that flowed to Afghanistan.

The Weakness of Multilateralism. The United Nations was effectively marginalised by the coalition that formed after 9/11. For the first time in its history, NATO invoked Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty, which considers an attack against one ally as an attack on all. After the Bonn Conference,

endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1383, installing Hamid Karzai as interim head of government, the UN had very limited impact at least at a strategic level. It should be asked whether things might have been worse without the UN, no matter the number of committed individuals within its ranks? Or did its presence contribute to the integration of security, developmental and political concerns as the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA)[3] mandate implies? Overall, the record of multilateral success in Afghanistan is dire, though the internal assessment process will likely white-wash any failings. The same was true for the World Bank, despite the early positive impact of its National Solidarity Program—later the Citizen's Charter. At the end of the day, however, against the backdrop of the US-led 'Big War', these programmes amounted to little more than a sideshow.

The Poverty of Local Ownership. As the guerrilla adviser T.E. Lawrence famously put it, 'Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly.' Not for nothing was Afghanistan's history defined by its handling of foreign invaders and occupiers. At the same time, these local solutions have to be more attractive than those offered by the insurgents. Ultimately, too often the West wanted its Afghan partners to succeed more than they did themselves, and so at every turn stepped in to help them, like snowplough parents anxiously clearing every obstacle from the path of their children and then wondering why they remained dependent and lacking in resilience.

This paternalism—and the resulting reluctance to wait for real, organic solutions to develop on their own—meant that too many actors and projects spent too much time chasing too many short-term projects with too much donor money. The West overwhelmed and undermined already fragile institutions in the search for quick fixes over longer-term capacity development.

A Failure to Understand why Things did and didn't Happen. Everyone was to blame for the failures in Afghanistan, but the West bears a huge responsibility, in large part for failing to understand the nature of Afghanistan and its region, and arrogantly assuming its own ways were best. Military assets matter, but so does the will to fight, usually built on a strong connection to society and a willingness to defend values. Local ownership of the problem and the solution is crucial. At the same time,

locals should not trust the rhetoric and commitment of outside actors: they need to plan and act towards an international exit from the start.

A Failure of Moral Character. In 2002, then-Senator Joe Biden said, on returning from a trip to Afghanistan, that the failure to establish a solid national government could create a 'lawless safe haven for anti-American terrorists', adding that 'security is the basic issue in Afghanistan. Whatever it takes, we should do it. History will judge us harshly if we allow the hope of a liberated Afghanistan to evaporate because we failed to stay the course.'[4] Biden's own words are an appropriate judgment on his character.

As the Americans showed in Vietnam, the British in Aden, the Egyptians in Palestine, and the Soviets in Afghanistan, insurgents can lose every battle yet still win the war if they can keep going and hold enough support from the population. What happened in Afghanistan in 2021 was not a defeat, but something between a betrayal and a moral collapse.

Politicians such as President Biden, no less than other coalition heads of government, would do well to remember Winston Churchill's observation in the darkest hour of the Second World War: nations that go down fighting rise again; those that surrender tamely are lost forever. Nobody—with the exception of some of our Afghan colleagues, or of those in the veterans' networks who were, months later, still working night and day to help Afghan partners—went down fighting. The moral stench of this betrayal will cling to them forever, and so it should.

* * *

Unlike other situations where the West had shown strategic patience and stayed the course—including Germany, Cyprus, Japan and Korea—American politicians decided, and their allies lacked the capacity to do anything but tamely follow, that it was time to quit Afghanistan, thereby generating a self-fulfilling prophecy of collapse and defeat.

The collapse of the Afghan National Army in the face of the Taliban's advance in July and August 2021 was the face of that failure. As described in Chapter Four, despite numbers and equipment that were, on paper, more than adequate to hold the Taliban, the sudden withdrawal of US air support, intelligence, logistics and maintenance left the ANA fatally exposed.

Unable to resupply more than a third of the 200 farflung and thinly spread bases bequeathed to them by NATO, government forces first consolidated and then retreated to a core around Kabul and other cities. That their fighting strength on paper (with police and militias) of about 400,000 people did not equate to fighting capacity on the ground, reflects the large number of ghost soldiers in their ranks, the lack of a government worth fighting for, and the selection-destruction cycle. The last resulted in Afghanistan's best troops draining away from the conventional units whose backbone they would have formed, then being thrown into an endless series of high-risk missions that killed them off far more quickly than their regular counterparts. As noted earlier, this reached a climax in the summer of 2021, when the SOF and Commandos were bled white in Helmand and Kandahar, even as the Taliban captured district after district, then city after city, across the country.

As Gordon McCormick's study of endgame dynamics in civil war highlights, once a state begins to come apart, reaching a tipping point—which probably occurred between May and July 2021, between the ending of US air support and the abandonment of Bagram—the pace of collapse accelerates rapidly, the war suddenly seems to speed up, and things fall apart with stunning speed.

Then there was the failure of politics: internationally, regionally and domestically. Domestic political alignment was undoubtedly easier for the Taliban to ensure since they had a simple objective: kick out the foreigners and re-establish the emirate. For the government, it was more difficult to motivate people to fight for more amorphous notions of plurality, modernity and development, especially in a conservative, tribal, religious society, let alone one in which government corruption, abuse and hypocrisy made a mockery of the values Kabul claimed to be fighting for. The Ghani government, like that of Hamid Karzai before it, was distracted by the creation of a parasitic rentier elite that was intent on establishing a governance system to facilitate extraction and state-capture rather than building a functioning state.

Both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani were complicit in this failure, Ghani more so since, unlike Karzai, he did not stay to face the music. He will end his life as the man who ran away, a sad footnote in history. 'The way it ended,' with President Ghani fleeing Kabul, 'erased all the gains made', observes the former mayor of Kabul, Mohammad Daoud Sultanzoy.

‘If he had given way to an interim authority a year earlier, we would have had continuity and an inclusive government.’[5] Instead, a president elected with fewer than a million votes out of only 9.7 million registered voters in the 2019 election, carried on regardless. His was a difficult task, no doubt, but one that he failed to measure up to, for all his irascible intellect.

As we have noted, the word Taliban is a plural: much depends on which faction of the movement ends up on top, and whether leaders in Kabul can forge a measure of unity and common purpose. Neither the US nor the Islamic State is much of a threat to the Taliban government in Kabul, but disunity among Taliban factions might be a lethal one.

Whether or not the Taliban leaders in Kabul choose a path of relative moderation will be one indicator of Afghanistan’s future and its likely challenges; another will be whether they attempt to include potentially divisive warlord elements within their ranks in order to maintain stability. ‘This is the same logic of inclusion,’ warns one former senior Afghan official, ‘that sowed the seeds of collapse of the government to the Taliban.’[6] Here the Taliban, like Karzai and Ghani, will be damned if they do include regional players and damned if they don’t, as the mujahideen period of anarchic ‘rule’ between 1992 and 1996 reminds us.

The differences and divisions among the Taliban’s factions, as well as between the Taliban and their international supporters including China, Pakistan and perhaps Iran and Russia, will likely also become more pronounced over time, not least because none of these countries will fancy a radical Islamist regime on its doorstep. This will in part reflect whether the Taliban will re-engage with Al-Qaeda, a relationship that the Taliban’s founder, Mullah Muhammad Omar, described as a ‘chicken bone stuck in his throat’.[7] The evidence so far suggests that Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders remain close.

* * *

Some will draw the lesson from the humiliating incompetence of the failure in Afghanistan that outsiders should never try to re-engineer other people’s social and political systems. ‘These things take a long time and can only be done from within’ says Sir Rodric Braithwaite of both the Soviet and subsequent eras. He observes that in Afghanistan ‘several reforming

governments had failed to modernise the country even before the Russians turned up. Their attempts, for example, to improve the status of women went wrong because of the deep-rooted and wide-spread opposition of Afghan men. Some of the reforming Afghan rulers lost their jobs, others their lives.'

'Overwhelming military power doesn't work in this context,' he notes. But, he adds, 'If there's a lesson to take from the Russians, it's probably that counter-terrorism does work if you're prepared to be sufficiently ruthless. They hammered the Chechens into the ground, then outsourced the management of the place to a completely unscrupulous local warlord. We're not prepared to use those methods these days.'[8]

Nor would we ever suggest such an approach, which has its own extremely serious drawbacks—the lack of legitimacy resulting from utter moral bankruptcy being one of the most important. Still, understanding what went wrong in Afghanistan after 9/11 remains important because such international interventions—with all the accompanying threats and opportunities—will certainly occur again, whether we want them to or not, and whatever our expectation of success and failure, since they will be driven by human emotion.[9]

We easily come to regret such actions at their conclusion, since we forget what drove them at their inception. As Robert Kagan notes, 'We live history forward, in the chaos of onrushing events, without a clear guide. But we judge history backwards, smugly armed with the knowledge of what did happen and uninterested in what might have happened.'

This explains the oscillation in American foreign policy over the last century, in particular. It also helps to explain the enthusiasm for war after 9/11, driven for some by the promise of the end of one era of history and start of a new one for the Muslim world, and for others simply by fear.[10] Kagan is far from an impartial commentator here, given his history on both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. But then, neither are we.

Most Americans favoured attacking Afghanistan and, in 2003, Iraq,[11] because they feared the consequences of another massive terrorist attack on their own soil, as reflected in the politics of the time. The US Senate voted 98 to zero and the House of Representatives 420 to 1 in September 2001 in favour of the war in Afghanistan. Just as panic, fear and vengeance drove the Bush administration's response to the Al-Qaeda attacks, the same emotions were on view at the end, especially among those Afghans

sheltering outside the airport, with the victorious and vengeful Taliban and Haqqanis attacking them, and the hollow men issuing their hollow threats from podiums in Washington.

President Bush had no idea what he wanted to do with Afghanistan once Al-Qaeda and its host had been booted out. He and his administration were not inclined towards nation-building, but he also did not want to risk leaving a vacuum that the Taliban could fill quickly.[12] His successors faced the same dilemma, and the absence of viable alternatives, while the Taliban continued to grow in strength from the end of 2003.

This half-hearted commitment, always with one eye on the exit, was noted by the Afghans and by players across the region. The longer Washington lingered, half in and half out, surging then resetting for a drawdown, deploying just enough troops and resources to keep the war going but not enough to win, the less the Afghans in government were willing to commit to building institutions and clean governance. All the while, the Taliban were willing to bide their time.

This had a particularly negative effect on the Afghan army, already a hotchpotch of competing regional and ethnic allegiances. Coupled with endemically weak administration and leadership, and a steady inflow of dollars, corruption was the outcome. ‘Too often, as Americans,’ notes Elliot Ackerman, who served five tours of Afghanistan and Iraq, ‘we equated corruption in Afghanistan with moral failure on the part of the Afghans, while rarely questioning our own complicity in creating conditions that fostered corruption.

‘Most tragically, our consistent messaging that we were on our way out of Afghanistan encouraged Afghans in positions of power to embrace corruption—specifically, the siphoning of resources for personal gain—as the one clear and sure means of survival. Corruption became a financial contingency plan, the choice any reasonable Afghan would make to ensure a safe future for their children.’

As Ackerman asks: ‘When every year the Americans promised that the next year would bring an American drawdown and eventual abandonment to the Taliban, what choice would you make?’

While the Pakistanis were on-side immediately after 9/11, they knew from their own, bitter history that they could carelessly be cast aside by Washington as its priorities shifted—as they invariably would be, given Washington’s stunted attention span and political narcissism. And

politicians in Islamabad knew the US would never risk its supply routes to Afghanistan, which mostly passed through Pakistan's ports, and thus was unlikely to press Pakistan so hard that it risked destabilising an already fragile political environment. Islamabad's hedging was apparent, most visibly, in supporting Osama bin Laden. Now that Pakistan, or elements of its Deep State, have helped the Taliban to victory, their own challenges will return, setting in motion the next act in a longer play on the regional stage.

Whether the US or another international coalition will have to re-invade or relaunch counter-terrorist actions in Afghanistan can be answered, in part, by a question: would a repeat 9/11-style attack on US soil have been made easier or more difficult without NATO in Afghanistan? If the international mission helped prevent another 9/11, has the price paid been too high, or could things have been done better at lower cost—in both human and financial terms?

From the above, it is possible to draw up a list of do's and don'ts for international missions.

The Ledger: The Do's and Don'ts

DO's	*DON'Ts*
Think things through from the start with a coherent strategic plan.	Allow personalities and personal or institutional agendas to dominate, with no viable exit strategy.
Ensure strategic patience; understand that the period of recovery will likely be at least as long as the period of decline.	Externally impose a state, which is usually the outcome of vigorous and often lengthy and violent social and political processes and struggles.
Seek unity and continuity of effort.	Engage in too-rapid rotations of command staff; a search for quick fixes, or instant expertise.
Pursue a political solution from a position of military strength.	Cobble together a peace agreement as a face-saving means of exit.
Support local entrepreneurship based	Tolerate corruption as the acceptable

on actual, not perceived, needs.	short-term cost of stability.
Acknowledge the reality that countries get rich by making things and selling them.	Embrace aid as a long-term development tool.
Reduce costs to market.	Subsidise and pick winners in the hope of catalysing an economy.
Remember that sequencing matters.	Engage in elections before peace and stability are in place.
Put diplomatic and political efforts in the lead, with a military supporting effort.	Attempt a military solution to political problem.
Mentor politicians, government officials and military officers in that order of priority.	Focus on the military to the exclusion of other components.
Focus on peace as a platform, with local parties in the driver's seat.	Burden the peace effort with finite timetables and secondary concerns driven by outside stakeholders.
Emphasise local ownership of both problems and solutions.	Seek short cuts and 'work-arounds' to make up for local governance shortcomings.
Carefully prioritise plans, acknowledging the limits of local capacity.	Pursue long wish-lists, rooted in failure, to match capacity with objectives.
Ensure regional actors are pushing the parties to a negotiated inclusive solution.	Ignore regional interests and influences.
Build local capacity to maintain and operate equipment and engender local trust.	Build local security forces in in your own image.

Cultivate and capitalise on goodwill, letting allies into the strategic design from the start.	Go it alone.
Understand why things happen—and why they don't.	Believe that enlightenment is the solution.
Take the enemy seriously, applying concerted effort to defeat them.	Underestimate the adversary.

The single most important need is for a long-term political strategy. This is as true for Afghanistan as it was for Iraq, Syria or Libya, where absence of a political strategy left behind chaos.

Security efforts, even if they had ultimately succeeded, could only ever buy time for the Afghan government to establish itself and make peace. The failure to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table proved costly, not least because doing so would have locked the Pakistanis into a regional pact. This should have driven policy from the start, with the military as only one part (albeit a critical one) in the solution.

As General Nick Carter notes, 'If you are going to prevail in these sorts of environments, you need to bring together at each appropriate level all of the levers of power, whether that is aid, whether that is administration, whether that is security, or whether it is the messaging … into a comprehensive approach that goes with the grain of a local solution or local regional solution.' As Carter observes, 'it is not really for the military to do this. The military should be there providing a supporting function… in support of the civil authority.'[13]

The challenge of doing so was compounded by the West's lagging diplomatic initiatives with Pakistan, at least by comparison with the efforts made inside Afghanistan itself. As intimated above, there was understandable nervousness about twisting the arm of a volatile, not wholly durable state (with a significant Islamic extremist constituency); one that has nuclear weapons and exists in a permanent state of tension with its nuclear-armed neighbour. Western diplomacy was always about applying enough pressure to secure concessions but never so much as to risk 'breaking' Islamabad or pushing Pakistan firmly into a Russian and Chinese orbit. The West also needed the lines of communication through Pakistan to

support its Afghan operations, resulting in it, for much of the war, turning a blind eye to Pakistani support for the Taliban.

Thought should also have been given to how an international presence would destabilise the delicate balance required to maintain the fragile patchwork of allegiances that make up Afghanistan. By picking sides, the coalition had much the same political effect as the Soviets in 1979. Attempts to create political compromise at Bonn were too narrow, in that Bonn was a conference of the victors, leaving out the enemy. The focus on delivering a constitution and elections before stability and prosperity put the cart before the horse, as Afghans' limited enthusiasm for the electoral process shows. And leaving the monarchy out of any consideration for a constitutional role save that of Mohammed Zahir Shah as 'Father of the Nation' neglected one of the few unifying strands in Afghanistan's diverse and divided social tapestry.

Lakhdar Brahimi, the veteran Algerian diplomat who chaired the Bonn Conference, defends the absence of the Taliban from Bonn saying that the 'US would not have allowed it' and 'they would anyway not have come'. But at the same time, he recalls the period immediately after 9/11: 'I asked —where is the Taliban, where did they go? They could not have evaporated.' This omission, he says, was the 'original sin'.[14]

The rapid collapse of the government in the face of a resurgent Taliban on the eve of the 20th anniversary of 9/11, illustrates both how difficult it was to state-build from outside in a hostile region, and how opaque the politics remained for outsiders, dependent on the political deals and personalities more than the hard power of the state. One indicator of the complexity is in the Kabul government's misreading of power dynamics countrywide, which caused many in the ANA to give up without a fight. Like Afghanistan itself, the Taliban are a grouping of loosely federated, frequently shifting alliances of convenience, riven by factional motivations, both for survival and prosperity.

The metrics should have considered both security and development, ensuring that the longer-term logic of development (including education and housing, for example) was not at risk of being overshadowed by short-term imperatives for security (and later, Western withdrawal). And these metrics should have been focused on the number of sustainable livelihoods created, not the number of projects or money expended.

While circumstances forced the Afghans into extraordinary and admirable resourcefulness, eking out a living and surviving is not development, as Africa also shows. The country cannot progress and prosper without changed strategic circumstances; that is, an enabling environment for business and for its citizens. The likelihood of this happening any time soon is, of course, next to none.

Donors should have realised that Afghan politicians would behave in exactly the same manner as other politicians in assessing their options and opportunities, and that the country would develop accordingly. Afghans responded to incentives—and disincentives—much as anyone else would, facing similar choices. Little of the aid activity addresses basic problems in collapsed societies, which may, of course, have something to do with why they collapsed in the first instance, and often with the very weak connection between people and their government.

Inevitably, the international response falls back into a tried and trusted routine, where metrics focus on process and money expended rather than effect. Understanding why things happen and unpicking incentive structures in the local political economy are key to the success of any mission, yet possibly the least well-understood aspects—one of the reasons why elite-driven political changes seldom sticks. The aid was of course never intended just for Afghans: the 2008 ACBAR assessment estimated, for instance, that 40% of aid returns to donor countries in profits and salaries—the 'aeroplane aid' mentioned by Afghans.[15]

We must never underestimate the capabilities or misrepresent the extent and depth of commitment of the enemy, nor discount the extent to which international presence may change conflict dynamics. Like an outsider wading into someone else's domestic dispute, we risk wandering in and clumsily turning all parties against us.

In the Afghan case, the West arrived in 2001 with the limited tactical objective of removing Al-Qaeda on a shoestring budget. The 2002 Tokyo donors' conference on Afghanistan, at which $4.5 billion was pledged to reconstruction,[16] offered a different path, but it was overly ambitious and massively underestimated the scale of the governance challenge. The road map provided by the complex, carefully sequenced Afghan National Development Strategy was pie in the World Bank sky: completely correct on paper in terms of needs, but hopelessly out of kilter with the reality of Afghan capacity on the ground. The extent of continued foreign aid pledges

—the 2012 Tokyo donor's conference pledged $16 billion over four years for example—made little significant difference to the deteriorating security trajectory.

A better plan would have assisted Afghan ownership of the solution by avoiding an overload of fragile local governance systems, reducing the potential for donor fragmentation and 'engagement fratricide'—the tearing apart of aid recipients by multiple donors. That Afghanistan was ultimately led to its collapse by a president who had spent much of his professional life working for the World Bank, and a chunk of his time as president and finance minister advocating such complexity, epitomised the problem.

Beyond all this, there was—and is always—a need for a carefully-constructed realistic narrative and time frame for peace and stability. The failure to integrate the message with the strategy—an essential part of any counter-insurgency campaign—was to be expected from an operation that lacked a clear strategy per se. It also made expectation management extraordinarily difficult.

To be effective, a post-conflict narrative could have been situated in a regional vision for Central Asia, seeing security through the lens of stability and prosperity in all countries, rather than by keeping neighbours off-balance, vulnerable and insecure. It should have made the case that a commitment to Afghanistan was in the global interest; that it was impossible for the world—and especially the region—to sleep peacefully if Afghanistan was radicalised and unstable, as 9/11 demonstrated. It should also have accentuated the commitment to governance and an end to corruption, thereby driving a wedge between the warlords and the government.

The diplomatic resources dedicated to regional peace-making should have backed up this promise. 'It's not easy dealing with the region,' observes Braithwaite, 'when they live there, and you come from 3,000 miles away.' This is as true for the West's relationship with Pakistan as it is for Iran. 'But,' he notes, 'diplomacy is all about talking to all sorts of nasty people.'[17] Successful diplomacy requires finding common ground, not name-calling and pigeon-holing.

For external actors, patience is the greatest quality of all in such situations of peace- and state-building. Yet President Biden, who argued against the Afghan surge in 2009, like Trump before him, wanted out of Afghanistan at any cost in defiance of military advice, no matter how poor

the planning and ill-judged the timing, just as President Bush's team was hell-bent on invading Iraq regardless of what anyone said. Biden's mistake quickly turned into a strategic defeat. But he was not alone in wanting out. The loss of appetite among America's NATO allies to continue the Afghan operation (not to mention their apparent lack of clout with Washington) was signalled by the absence of political debate around Washington's decision to leave.

The Taliban's calculus might have changed had the West signalled it was there for the long haul, as it had in Korea. They were more likely to commit to a political solution if faced with the prospect of a long-term military stalemate instead of using it as a ruse to buy time. Yet, the West was never going to stay as long as was required; and the longer it stayed, the more problematic its presence became. And herein lies the greatest failing of all—the inability to see the mission beyond the self-referential urges of American or European needs, but rather in terms of the needs of Afghans and their region.

* * *

Aziz Amin flew from Bahrain to Washington Dulles Airport with his family, then to a temporary refugee centre at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin. By the time he arrived in the American Midwest, we were working on getting larger 'packages' of refugees out the country, including all three presidential security detail officers and their families, along with groups of journalists and other government officials. We had some success, but it took perseverance, not a little bloody-mindedness, and much stamina over almost two weeks. The effort continues today, albeit with reduced success, since the coalition pullout has made every aspect dramatically harder. Much more than this, it took quite remarkable bravery and endurance on the part of the Afghans. Defeated, betrayed, confused, fearful, tired, hungry and at constant risk of the vagaries of Taliban checkpoints and ISIS-K suicide bombers, many who stuck it out were rewarded with evacuation. They faced new uncertainties but at least were no longer at risk from the near certainty, for many, of lethal Taliban vengeance.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Symphathizer* centres on ties of loyalty and identity as Vietnamese refugees adjusted to the post-war reality of their new lives in America. A common theme between this book and another

masterpiece from that war, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, is the failure of the intervenor to concede wrongdoing, citing the 'innocent' and idealised intentions with which they entered the war. The analysis of Vietnam and its aftermath dwells on the conflict's impact on the baby-boomer generation—the resistance to social order, the rights of women, the hippie era, and the end of the age of new frontiersmen and foreign policy naiveté.

The global and social media outpourings on Afghanistan during the evacuation told their own story about whose war this was. It centred on the views of outsiders telling their own story, rather than Afghans telling theirs. It was about which Afghans were most at risk (according to Western ideas) and thus should be prioritised for evacuation. It was about the defeat of the US and its allies, rather than what that defeat said about the Taliban, about whom so remarkably little was known by the general public, even after decades of war.

The discussion was fundamentally a narcissistic, solipsistic outpouring, which in the end was less about the Afghans than about the bad light in which it cast certain political leaders. It was as if the most important thing about what was literally the end of the world for millions of Afghans was how it made us feel about ourselves. It was the apogee of a war of *self-referentialism*, a selfish and incestuous habit that has become customary in an age where we centre feelings over facts.

Yet fundamentally, the failure occurred because it was America and the West that needed saving, or proving, not Afghanistan or its people. They were the means, not the end. This point about Afghanistan is true of aid in general; donors make it all about themselves, so that the metrics and objectives are fundamentally misguided.

The nadir of this narcissism came, of course, at the end of the evacuation, in the shape of attempts to move dogs and cats out of the country at the precise moment when all bandwidth should have been devoted to saving human souls. That extraordinary mission spoke volumes about the subject and the object of this mission. It was all about saving and therapeutic virtue, high-fives and photo-ops, high-tech and troop surges, local allies and compacts, enduring support and civilising freedom.

Could a mission that was centred on external needs ever hope to stabilise Afghanistan?

'As many as twenty-five ruling dynasties have swept through Afghanistan over the past three millennia,' Edward Girardet reminds us in his 2011 book, *Killing the Cranes*.[18] He writes, 'One cannot help but be overwhelmed by Afghanistan's past. It has repelled, absorbed, or simply let pass through those who invaded, rampaged, or marched across its borders.' If the international community's mission was to assist in enabling Afghans to become self-reliant and resilient to ward off potentially harmful pressures from outside, it failed.

At the strategic level, Afghanistan is the second time in less than a decade that a large army designed, trained and equipped by the West has collapsed catastrophically when faced with a determined insurgent opponent. The first was Iraq in 2014–15, a collapse that seems less severe only in retrospect because politicians in Baghdad never turned tail and ran, and because—unlike in Afghanistan—the international community rallied and helped the Iraqis fight back. This should raise the question of whether Western-built partner forces can ever be viable, and if so, under what circumstances. It should also prompt reflection as to whether a different, minimalist military approach might be more appropriate. In Afghanistan specifically, four big issues were at play.

The first was the utter failure, over two decades, to address the issues of corruption and nepotism in the central government and institutional weakness at the provincial and district levels. The second concerns the pervasive negative impact of Western money (whether in the form of direct aid or indirect salaries) in fuelling corruption and embedding dependency. The third is the unwillingness, or inability, to reflect reality back to Western capitals (reflecting the optimism bias among officials committed to the project). The fourth is the flawed assumption that a Western design based on Western values could be imposed on a culturally conservative population, thousands of miles away and against their will.

The Taliban consistently acted principally as a war machine, and to a lesser extent as a vigilante law and order organisation, rather than as a political or religious force. This reflected their make-up, with the majority of the rank and file comprising people whose education, such as it was, did not extend to governance.

After 1996 the Taliban focused, too, on fighting the Afghan government and international forces rather than training, investing in and finding individuals capable of governing the kind of complex society that Afghanistan has become in the meantime. It has also been heavily supported by foreign sponsors, reliance on whom is a weakness for the Taliban, not least since these ties can expose them to accusations of terrorist funding. Pakistan has essentially dealt with the Taliban as a proxy force, though this has been made more difficult by the Taliban's highly fragmented nature, its leadership for one being scattered across both Pakistan—Quetta, Peshawar, Karachi and Miran Shah—along with the Doha-Qatar axis.

All these aspects will prove very difficult to manage now, as a consequence of internal power struggles and the need to satisfy stakeholders, maintain a provincial and tribal balance, extend loyalty to foreign actors who supported the Taliban during their fight, and find a common language around which to form a consensus. It may also lead to tensions among the Taliban's external clients, notably Pakistan and Qatar, between competing versions of a weak and dependent or a modernising, strengthening version of Afghanistan.[19]

More broadly, Afghanistan remains iconic for Salafi/Jihadist terrorist organisations worldwide. Al-Qaeda-aligned Islamists in the West, and those who follow the grievance rather than the group, have also lauded the Taliban's success. This has the potential to inspire acts of terrorism in Western countries. Terrorist travel to and from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is likely, particularly from areas where extremist groups are under pressure—for example, in Northwest Syria—a likelihood that will grow over time if a Taliban government is seen as receptive. The Emirate will also attract Westerners. How this translates into a broader terrorist threat depends on the permissiveness granted to external Islamists, particularly Al-Qaeda and those associated with it.

The ideological antipathy between Islamic State and the Taliban is well understood, and it seems reasonable to argue that the Taliban in power provides a boost to Al-Qaeda's narrative of strategic patience rather than to ISIL's accelerationism. But the ISIS-K attack on Kabul airport during the evacuation seized the moment. ISIS-K, not Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, killed the last American soldiers to die in Afghanistan. If ISIS-K endures against Taliban pressure, it may emerge as the most credible ISIL branch, and the

one most likely to develop an ability to mount attacks beyond its region. It has already begun a serious anti-Taliban insurgency, launching several deadly suicide bombings in Kandahar, Kunduz and Kabul.

Regionally, the great strategic lesson is that of asymmetry of interest. The interest of Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Afghanistan, is enduring by definition: geography makes it so. India's interests via historical rivalry with Pakistan have been sharpened by the likelihood that India could be the target of choice for any terrorism spill-over from Afghanistan, and the threat posed by China's relationship with both Pakistan and a Taliban-run Afghanistan. Turkey has a relationship partly conditioned by the presence of a Turkic minority in Afghanistan, by its relationship with the Central Asian states, and its desire to pursue a neo-Ottoman foreign policy in competition with Iran and Saudi Arabia, both which have a close interest in Afghanistan.

The extent to which regional actors can influence future events in Afghanistan—and influence them positively—will reflect their ability to manage their own domestic circumstances. Episodic economic crisis within Pakistan is one marker, which may serve to deepen Islamabad's integration with China, which in turn will shape India's posture.

Western interests, in the absence of a clear threat emanating from Afghanistan—a threat that was removed by 2002—is weaker. Rather than serving as an example of how to stabilise and rebuild failed states, the failure in Afghanistan and the spectacularly incompetent manner of the West's exit will not only undermine its global credibility and the value of its partnership with erstwhile allies, but also boost its geopolitical rivals while sending encouraging signals to rogue regimes and terrorist groups elsewhere. The failure of the Western model of state-building intervention is likely to increase the attractiveness of the Chinese alternative, which already has significant traction, sharpening its competitive edge, including in Africa.

Afghanistan reinforces the lesson that striking a peace deal—and mediation—requires bringing the sides together around a common set of principles with a clear and inclusive methodology.

In the future, in Afghanistan, the best the West can work for is a moderate, inclusive Afghan government.

The cost to the Taliban of hosting Al-Qaeda, coupled with its dependency on external sources of financing—as much as 40% of

Afghanistan's GDP was, by the start of 2021, dependent on aid, perhaps double that of government revenue—make it reasonable to expect that version 2.0 will be more moderate, or at least more pragmatic, than Taliban 1.0, even though it maintains the same ideological impulses. But that would require a certain strategic purpose on the part of donors, including a willingness to create and employ the leverage of aid and recognition conditional on the establishment of an inclusive government in Kabul through a legitimate process.

It will depend, also, on how the opposition to the Taliban—notably the National Resistance Front led by Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh—responds, and the extent to which it can offer a credible alternative to the Taliban. Without a certain level of cohesion, the opposition risks being picked apart by Taliban selectivity, as Massoud warns, citing offers to individuals to participate (and enrich themselves) in the government, rather than through an inclusive political process along the lines of a Loya Jirga.[20]

Thus, ultimately the only antidote to Taliban rule in Afghanistan might be Taliban rule. In the interim, advises Sherard Cowper-Coles, former British ambassador in Kabul, the best course is to keep channels of communication open, allow aid and visits, and 'treat the Taliban as you would any liberation movement: empower the moderates and isolate the extremists, as was done with the Stern Gang, for example, and Irgun in Israel, or the Continuity and Real IRA in Northern Ireland.'[21]

The blow to the moral authority of the US, and its perceived reliability as an ally, has resounded across Europe, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, and particularly Israel. What happens if the US has, willingly or otherwise, abdicated its global leadership role? Will that vacuum be filled by China, Russia and others? Will the future response to any threatened use of force by an American President be 'you and what Army? The one that just got its ass handed to it by the Taliban?' There is also a risk, in defeat, of an over-reaction in foreign affairs to crises elsewhere, such as in Iran or over China and the Taiwan Strait.

And yet, more positively, the West's withdrawal offers an opportunity for Afghanistan to define itself and its relationship with the region not through the lens of America's role or by the perennial question of security, but rather by a set of nascent opportunities around trade, natural resources from minerals to water, and communications.

It is not impossible to envisage a range of regional engagement in which win-win commercial collaboration is achievable—though any such thing would be hard to imagine under a revanchist Taliban emirate. The right lesson from Afghanistan is to question the modalities of interventionism, and of assistance, which take a different and more constructive form than occupying and trying to build a country from the top-down. The default to isolation over interventionism is one, while other lessons include the need to improve the delivery of assistance and the manner in which local institutions can be assisted rather than overwhelmed. Overall, the need to strengthen local models and successes, *à la* Somaliland, rather than trying to create them from scratch in the intervenor's image, is a key guide to future success.

* * *

The West started a war in Afghanistan which it did not know how to define and implement and, consequently, which it had no clear idea how to finish. The absence of such long-term strategic clarity explains, in part, why the US, with all its military and financial resources, has been winning battles but losing wars ever since Vietnam. Winning requires marshalling all instruments of national power for victory, not promising the easy political traffic of quick victories, listening to advice which warns against such ludicrous assumptions and heeding the necessity for long-term consistency.[22] It also means not going to some places at all if this advice cannot be followed. And it demands focusing on politics first, last and always.[23]

Finally, while there is a risk of once more making the failure in Afghanistan about the interveners and not the Afghans, the question must be asked for those who tried: was it all for nothing? On this question, unsatisfying as such an answer may be, it is far too early to tell. As the children of a new generation grow up under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, even as others come of age in refugee camps worldwide, it certainly feels very much as if we have come full circle.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW SYMPATHISERS

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3. ASSESSING FOUR FAILURES

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CONCLUSION: THE LEDGER—LESSONS FROM FAILURE IN AFGHANISTAN

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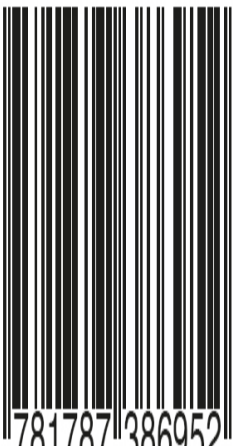
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